

TIMOTHY HERRING SERIES

BISMARCK HERRINGS



GLADYS
MITCHELL

writing as

MALCOLM TORRIE

BISMARCK HERRINGS

Titles by Gladys Mitchell

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Gladys Mitchell writing as Malcolm Torrie

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BISMARCK HERRINGS

GLADYS MITCHELL WRITING
AS MALCOLM TORRIE

 THOMAS & MERCER

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To Joan, Mig, and Arnold at Freagair

To Joan and Mig

It was not in the Winter
Our loving lot was cast;
It was the time of roses—
We pluck'd them as we pass'd.

Thomas Hood—*Time of Roses*

To Arnold

You that build the shade-roof, and you that
 court the rays,
You that leap besprinkling the rock stream-
 rent;
He has been our fellow, the morning of our
 days;
Us he chose for housemates, and this way
 went.

George Meredith—*Phoebus With Admetus*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

All the quotations used as chapter headings are taken from Robert Herrick's poems included in *Hesperides* and *His Noble Numbers*.

CHAPTER ONE

Warlock Hall

"I could wish you dispossess
Of that Fiend that marres your rest;
And with Tapers comes to fright
Your weake senses in the night."

To All Young Men That Love

Even in sunshine the mansion looked formidable and forbidding, an ugly, ill-tempered, grotesque chunk of masonry rising behind its gatehouse in a weedy, neglected courtyard and backed by pine-trees in which the wind kept up a perpetual fretful murmuring. Its new owner, his hands in his trousers' pockets, stared at it in perplexity.

"What the devil am I going to do with it, Tom?" he asked. "Do you suppose there's any chance of selling it?"

"Oh, if it were mine I wouldn't think of getting rid of it until I'd seen what it was like inside," said his companion. "Did they send you the keys?"

"No. I was told there's a caretaker or a housekeeper or somebody living on the premises and looking after things. She'll let us in."

"Why didn't you bring Alison with you? Isn't she interested?"

"Only morbidly, so to speak. I think the name of the house has put her off."

"Oh, really? Warlock Hall? Is she allergic to Merlin and his kind?"

"I suppose she must be. It's not surprising, considering what happened to her sister. Oh, well—Childe Roland to the dark tower came, and what he did we can do, I imagine, so let's demand admittance and find out the worst. If it's anything like this courtyard, the house must be in a rare mess. I suppose my great-uncle got past caring. He was almost a hundred years old when he died. It's taken the lawyers twelve months to sort out his affairs, poor old chap, but, honestly, I wish he'd left the place to somebody else."

"This doorway," said Tom Parsons, approaching it, "has come from a church." He and Timothy studied it. "Late Norman. I suppose the sixteenth-century owner collected it from a monastery after the Dissolution. There's one something like it at a Cornish hotel where I stayed."

"Odd ideas some people have," said Timothy.

Hammering on the door and prolonged tugging at an ancient wrought-iron bell-pull produced no response, although the two men could hear the reverberation of the one and the clanging of the other resounding inside the house.

"Somebody may be at the back," said Timothy Herring. "Let's stroll round."

To the right of the front door stretched a long stone wall pierced by several tall windows. From the end of this wall a room with an oriel jutted out into the ragged courtyard. The two men rounded the house, picking their way among weeds and stunted bushes, until they came to what had been the garden entrance, but it was smothered in climbing roses which had become so entirely out of hand that it was clear that the doorway had not been in use for years. The walls on either side of it were beginning to crumble and a flagged terrace, which ran the whole width of the house, had its stones forced apart by weeds and self-sown garden plants. Out to the left of the terrace were some decrepit, neglected outbuildings, all that was left of the stables.

“Well, Tim,” said Tom Parsons, “are you going to emulate the intrepid prince of *La Belle au Bois Dormant* and brave the rose-thorns, or shall we try tooting the horn of the car? Was the caretaker expecting you, by the way?”

“Yes, I suppose so. If she got my letter, she should be here to let us in. Perhaps she’s gone shopping or something, unless she’s drowned herself in the creek. I know / should, if I had to live alone in a place like this.”

When they reached the front of the house once more, they found a woman of past middle-age and a hulking, heavy-shouldered, surly-looking man of about thirty waiting in the courtyard.

“Good afternoon. Would you be Mrs. Gee?” asked Timothy.

“Which I am, sir, and this is my boy, Jabez. Would you be Mr. Herring, sir? Which you will be requiring the keys of the ’ouse. Jabez, top shelf of the pantry.” The young man, who carried a shot-gun over his arm, shambled off in the direction of the gatehouse. “Which maybe you could do with a nice cuppa tea, sir, the kittle bein’ on the ’ob and the water nicely a-simmerin’. I always think there’s nothing like a nice cuppa tea, sir, to refresh you after a journey.” Her tone was suspiciously sycophantic.

“It’s very kind of you,” said Timothy, “but I’m afraid we’ve only time to look over the house. I understood you were living in it, but we couldn’t make anybody hear.”

“Which I am truly sorry about that, sir, but my front door is under the archway and to the far side, so, as I didn’t hear nothing, it wasn’t until I thought you must be here, sir, as Jabez and me come out and see your car in the lane, sir.”

“Yes, it’s too wide for the archway. Are you living in the gatehouse, then?”

“Which I am, sir, it being more convenient that way.”

At this point Jabez reappeared without his gun and handed over the keys.

"I s'pose you won't be thinkin' of *livin'* up at the 'ouse, sir?" he enquired.

"I don't know why you should suppose that!" said Timothy somewhat sharply. "You had better come along and show us round. There may be things I shall need to ask you."

"Very good, sir, though it's mother as knows most about it, her keepin' it clean and aired out and the like of that." He followed Timothy and Parsons across the courtyard.

"What's your job here, then?" asked Timothy, over his shoulder. The man caught up with him.

"Why, I don't have no reg'lar job 'ere, sir. I belong to work down on the boats. I keeps Mother company of a night when I aren't wanted down on the Hard, which is a mile or two up-river where the yachting gents keeps their boats, sir, but I don't get paid for nothing to do with the 'ouse, sir."

"Oh, I see," said Timothy, ignoring the suggestion he detected from the last remark. "What made your mother decide to live in the gatehouse? Wouldn't she be far more comfortable in a room up at the Hall?"

"Which I'm not denying as she would, sir. Trouble is, you see, as Mother don't fancy the 'ouse, sir. Her got proper nervous up there."

"Even when you were with her?"

"Well, that couldn't be every night, sir, not with me on the boats, so her got on to fancyin' things. Not as I blame her, sir. It's a funny old place, is the Hall, as you'll soon find out if you thinks for to live in it."

Timothy frowned. There was nothing objectionable in the words themselves, but he detected a threat behind them.

The great hall of the mansion was sombrely impressive. At the end which the three men had entered by way of the screens passage there was a minstrels' gallery ornamented with the antlered heads of stags which certainly had never been born and bred in that flat, well-watered countryside. Along the interior wall opposite the windows hung a collection of forbidding family portraits. The open-timbered roof was of crown-post construction and behind what had been the mediæval dais an enormous Tudor fireplace had been built to replace a central hearth whose remains could still be seen beneath an elaborately carved, heavy, oak table.

From the great hall there were three exits, excluding the one to the screens passage. On the right of the fireplace a door opened on to a space (not much more than a lobby) leading to the room with the oriel window. This was a gloomy, almost square chamber, darkly panelled and having a heavy, ugly ceiling plastered with sixteenth-century patterning and blackened by smoke from a fireplace similar to the one in the hall.

A door on the left led into the same short passage and this ended in a newel staircase which also formed the third exit from the hall. It led downwards into a vaulted undercroft considerably older than the rest of the ancient house, and upwards, past a room containing a magnificent four-poster bed, to the long gallery which seemed to be in use as a library. Beyond this were a couple of rooms with a connecting door between them, and a landing from which a Tudor staircase descended. The landing also opened on to the minstrels' gallery.

A window at the further end of the landing overlooked the unkempt, overgrown grounds, and in the middle of these there was a huge, scum-covered pond almost large enough to be called a lake. Beyond this was a belt of pines whose murmuring seemed to intensify the desolation of the lonely, uncomfortable mansion.

Jabez remained on the landing, staring out of the window. Timothy, his depression increasing as he went from one room to another, stepped on to the minstrels' gallery and shivered in an icy draught. He tried to discover the source of this, but failed to do so. There was no window to light the gallery itself and its dark panelling had neither crack nor any man-made aperture, so far as he could see, except the archway by which he had entered. The front of the gallery, as he saw when he looked down from it into the great hall, was of solid oak. As he stood there, Parsons joined him.

"My word! Isn't it perishing up here!" he said. "Where does the draught come from? Haven't you felt it?"

"I can't make out where it comes from. I'm feeling it all right," replied Timothy, "and it isn't so much a draught as an area of bitter cold. We might almost as well be inside a refrigerator, mightn't we? I can't make it out, because it's very warm outside in the courtyard, so I don't see why it should be quite so cold up here."

They found Jabez still standing by the landing window.

"Why doesn't this staircase go any higher? There's another floor above this, isn't there?" asked Timothy.

"Only the attic floor, sir. There's nothing to see up above except a lot of junk. As to this staircase, sir, well, I did hear from somebody some time back as it wasn't, so to speak, born with the 'ouse, sir, but, as they say, imported."

"It's Tudor all right," said Parsons, examining the open carving of the oak newels and bending to look at the uncarpeted treads and risers, "but I see what you mean. It's been brought from some more stately mansion and wedded to this one. It doesn't really belong in this part of the house at all."

"Well, how do we reach the attics?" asked Timothy. "The newel stair seemed to end on this floor, too."

"Yes, so it do, sir, but there's a back staircase goes up from the passage you come in by, sir. Something for the

use of the servants in the days when the gentry could get what servants they wanted, I daresay."

Parsons looked at his watch.

"I don't want to hurry you, old man," he said apologetically to Timothy, "but I ought to be getting back pretty soon, I'm afraid."

"Oh, lord, yes. That goes for both of us. Is there anything else to look at downstairs, Gee?" asked Timothy.

"Just the two rooms where, so I was told, the kitchen and all that used to be, sir. The old gentleman's quarters, I was told."

"Oh, well, we may as well see them on our way out. Is it of any use to go down this stairway? Does it lead anywhere, or is it merely for ornament?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. Best way is to try it and find out."

The tone again stopped only just a little short of insolence.

"Oh, well, we can try it without your help," said Timothy, curtly. "Go and find your mother and tell her that we're off now, but that I shall be back very soon, so that she'd better get the four-poster bed properly aired, in case I decide to stay the night."

Jabez turned to go back by the way they had come, but he muttered something as he left them.

"What was that?" said Timothy sharply.

"No offence, sir. I only said as I reckoned you'd find one night in this place quite enough to be a-goin' on with. It's a nasty old house, sir, and that's a fact. Something wrong with it."

"And he's about right, at that," said Timothy, when the man had left them. The Tudor stair ended in a cul-de-sac whose open end led to the screens passage, and Timothy gave his verdict after they had returned to the ground floor and had inspected the only two rooms which appeared to have been inhabited. They were underneath the bedrooms

which were on the same floor as the library and were furnished as a bedroom and a small sitting-room.

"N.B.G.," he said, when they returned to the weedy courtyard. "I'll have this court and the gardens put to right and something done about the pernicious ice-house they call the musicians' gallery, and then up the place goes for auction."

"Would you be wanting me for anything further, sir?" enquired Jabez, meeting them. "If not, I ought to be gettin' on down to the Hard."

"No, that's all right," said Timothy. "You cut along. I'll just have a word with your mother." Jabez touched his forehead and slouched off. Timothy and Parsons followed him as far as the gatehouse archway and knocked at the side door. "We're off now, Mrs. Gee," said Timothy. He looked at the flight of steps which led to the habitable floor. "What on earth makes you choose to live in this poky hole?" he asked. "There seem to be two quite convenient rooms up at the Hall which you could use."

"Which was the old gentleman's only quarters, so I am give to understand, sir, and how he could abide to stop there all along of hisself I do not know. It's all I can do to make meself keep the 'All clean and aired out and that, but stop there of a night, well, I really couldn't bring myself."

"Well, I'll admit it seems a bit draughty in places," said Timothy, "but a few good fires would soon cure that, I should think."

"Which that perticular bitter cold is the sort what no fires can't cure, sir. The 'All is '*aunted*, that's what, and them as sees and 'ears no more than draughts, well, they're the lucky ones, sir, in my opinion."

Timothy did not challenge it. He smiled, tipped her ready palm, and followed Parsons out to the car.

“Haunted?” said Alison, when Timothy, back again in their hill-top Cotswold home, had given his wife an account of his visit. “Haunted by what?”

“Goodness knows. Haunted or not haunted, the whole place gave me the willies. I’ve never known anything so depressing in all my life. Anyway, I’ve decided to put it up for auction as soon as I’ve had it tidied up.”

“You won’t sell it before I’ve seen it, though, will you?”

“You said you didn’t want to see it.”

“I’ve changed my mind. You said there’s a creek near by. We could have a boat and then we could use the Hall as a country cottage when we felt like it, couldn’t we? When will you take me down there?”

“This year, next year, sometime, never, I should think. I hate the beastly place. What about a swim? We’ve got an hour before dinner.”

“I’ve only just had my hair done, and you won’t let me wear a bathing cap. *When* are you taking me to Herrings?”

“Where’s Herrings, for goodness’ sake?”

“Well, we’re not going to continue calling it Warlock Hall. I’ve a feeling that I’m going to love it, after all, but not with a name like that. Did you say it has a lake?”

“Yes, a dirty (literally) great stretch of scum and duckweed. Wonderful for mosquitoes in the summer.”

“We’ll turn it into a beautiful big swimming pool and then we can bathe indoors here and outdoors there.” As a wedding present to her, Timothy had built a Pompeian pool on the ground floor of the stone Cotswold house.

“We shan’t bathe anywhere if you don’t come along. We daren’t face Mrs. Nealons if we let her dinner spoil,” he said.

“You know,” said Alison, twenty minutes later, when, with one fluid movement, she had hoisted herself out of the translucent, pale green, warm water, “I’d like to spend Christmas at Herrings. We could have a house-warming and the waits could play in the great hall and the carol singers

could have the musicians' gallery and you could take people duck-shooting over the marshes and we could put at least two extra people in the gatehouse . . ."

"The gatehouse is Mrs. Gee's sanctum."

"Not when we've taken possession, darling. We shall have to get her a cottage. We must keep the gatehouse for ourselves. It will have a flat roof with a parapet, and from the top we shall be able to see for miles and miles across that flat green countryside and right out to sea, I shouldn't wonder. Apart from that, we don't necessarily have to keep her on, do we? Does she go with the house?"

"No. According to the lawyers, she isn't really a local woman. The caretaker job was advertised and she took it. Anyway, although I wouldn't mind keeping her on if she'd be useful, I'm not having that fellow Jabez hanging about the place. I don't like the cut of his jib. Do you want me to dry you?" He put a towel round her shoulders.

"No, you scrub too hard, and I'm feeling fragile."

"Nonsense! Good for the epidermis. I love you, especially like this:

'No beauty she doth miss
When all her clothes are on,
But Beauty's self she is
When all her clothes are gone.'

"All the same," said Alison, standing up and abandoning herself to his ministrations, "I still don't know why you married me. We're not alike; we don't even like the same things; you think I'm cussed; I think you're bossy and arrogant . . ."

"Never look a gift husband in the face when you're going fishing."

"I'm *not* fishing!"

"Of course not. You don't need to, do you? Always, inevitably, from me the well-turned compliments fall thick as autumn leaves in Vallombrosa."

"Less of the 'autumn,' if you don't mind. Summer is icumen in. Anyway, I must listen more carefully, because you won't think the same about me when I've borne you seven strapping sons. There won't be any compliments on my nakedness then."

"Ah, yes, our seven sons. 'A frieze on whitest marble drawn, and white feet making pallor in the sea.' But not just yet, my love. I'm not going to share you with seven other men."

"Be that as it may, you haven't given me a sensible answer to a sensible question."

"Which was?"

"When are we going to Herrings? You've nothing to do except remind Mrs. Gee to get the four-poster bed aired and to put some provisions in the larder."

"Good lord, you're not going to *sleep* in that house!"

"Not if it's haunted? Why, of course I am! I've never slept in a four-poster bed and I've never seen a ghost. How can you bear to deprive me of these riches? We'll go tomorrow or the next day."

From the roof of the gatehouse, which was flat and had been used as a look-out in former times, an immense panorama was spread out. Timothy made no comment, but sat on the broad parapet while Alison took in the widespread, desolate scene. To the south-east of the Hall stretched the marshes, intersected by tiny streams half-hidden among reeds and rushes and nourishing cream or purple comfrey and the water forget-me-not, and inhabited by voles, eels, pike, and water-fowl.

A narrow lane stopped abruptly at more marshes. In the opposite direction, north-west of the Hall, a far-off

cluster of roofs was overlooked and guarded by the square Norman keep of a castle. There were other paths, some of them barely decipherable, leading to the banks of a considerable river. This developed into a narrow, winding creek and terminated in an estuary which, in an oddly-shaped loop, embraced a small, reed-circled island.

A more depressing and uninteresting countryside could scarcely be imagined, thought Timothy, remembering his Cotswold home with its hilly sweeps of green and gold and brown, but to Alison, as she moved from one side of the gatehouse roof to another, the drowned and melancholy landscape, with its intermingling of water and sky, was a bourn of nostalgic enchantment like the country of a well-loved dream. She allowed her eyes to roam over marsh and fen, over ditches, drains, and the river, over the broader windings of the creek, and out to the sand-spits of the muddy estuary. She came over to Timothy at last, seated herself beside him, and said simply.

"I think your great-uncle must have been happy here."

"I can't imagine why you think so, or why you're so gone on the place," said Timothy. "Think of it in the winter! Howling winds, flooded lanes, every bit of that cranky old house shrieking its head off, rain lashing the windows, all the doors banging open and shut all night . . ."

"And the ghost roaming round in the shadows and wailing, 'Woe, thrice woe,' like Senna at Frankie Howerd in *Up Pompeii*," said Alison, laughing. "But I've never suggested we should stay here in the winter, darling, have I?"

"Who talked about Christmas, with waits and guests and carol singers? All right, as you insist on it, we're going to spend tonight up at the Hall," said Timothy, "but tomorrow morning you may have acquired a new outlook about staying here, even in the summer."

The Hall at night was undoubtedly eerie. Alison, lying beside Timothy in the four-poster, was glad she was not alone. Oddly disturbing creaks, tappings, and scufflings came from the panelling and from behind it, and occasionally there were sounds which might almost be interpreted as voices. They seemed to come from the newel stair from which the state bedroom opened.

“‘The isle is full of noises,’” she murmured, ignoring the more sinister sounds which the house provided and only listening to the wind in the pine-trees. “I can imagine I hear the sea.”

“Too far off,” said Timothy. “Do you want to talk, or are you sleepy?”

“Talk for a bit, I think, please.”

“I’ll tell you one thing. If—and it’s a very big “if” so far as I’m concerned—we do keep on this place instead of selling it, we’ll have electricity installed. Apart from the fact that all the cooking is by calor gas which Mrs. Nealons will never be persuaded to use, all this going to bed by candlelight would very soon drive me up the wall.”

“You’re not interested in good deeds shining in a naughty world?”

“What the—Oh, Portia, of course. Now, look, you don’t *really* like this ghastly, ghostly, unfriendly old pile, do you?”

“I don’t like the house much, but I love the country around it. To me it’s all ‘eve and morning and yon twelve-winded sky.’”

“Oh, lord! Not the *Shropshire Lad* at this time of night!”

“Why not? But if you want to change the subject, let’s talk about the ghost. What form do you think it will take?”

“It’s a vampire, and will suck your blood.”

“Don’t be revolting. I mean, Mrs. Gee seemed positive this place is haunted, but she wasn’t very specific, was she? Didn’t she throw out any hint at all of what we might expect? I do think she might have prepared us.”

"I don't think she's had any personal experience of the hauntings. I don't think she's ever actually slept in this house at all. I think she was far too scared, when she saw the size and the gloom of it, to do more than decide to earn her money by keeping it clean and aired, which, I must admit, she has done. But now, behold, the moon sleeps with Endymion, and I think we'd better do the same."

Far from sleeping, the moon swam restlessly in and out among the clouds. Then the wind dropped a little, so that the pines murmured on a gentler, soothing note. Further off, the waves creamed on to the pale, fine sands or washed suckingly about among the mud-flats. There was no sound at all from the river. It flowed as silently as death, but without death's strange inertia. The panelling continued its complaints, and Alison stirred once or twice in Timothy's arms. Automatically, each time, he tightened a reassuring embrace, but gradually this slackened off of itself as he drifted away into slumber.

Alison was still asleep when he woke on the following morning. There was a promising patch of sunlight on the wall. Cautiously he removed his encircling arm and turned to slide out of bed. On the previous night he had used his cigarette lighter for the candles, having discovered that there were no matches beside the calor gas appliance downstairs, but now, as he turned from Alison towards his bedside table, he saw that in the centre of it there was a box of vestas which (he could have taken his oath on this) had not been there the night before.

His movements had awakened Alison. She said:

"Are you getting up, then? What's the time?"

"Six-thirty. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, on the whole. I don't know whether it was a dream, though, or whether the ghost really came in here last night. I felt certain somebody did."

"It was a dream all right," said Timothy, not to alarm her. "I slept regardless, and I'm sure I'd have woken up if

the ghost, or anybody else, had paid us a visit.”

“Well, you might, of course, although I think you sleep more heavily than I do. Anyway, it must have been my imagination, mustn’t it? Nobody could get in, because we locked all the doors, and as for ghosts, well, nobody can believe in them at *this* time in the morning.”

“No—only at noonday,” said Timothy absently. He did not believe in ghosts, but somebody—and that meant a human being—had certainly managed to get into the room at some time during the night. The matches proved it.

“Oh, I don’t agree. At noonday people don’t cast much of a shadow, and ghosts don’t cast a shadow at all, at any time,” said Alison cheerfully, “so noonday is hardly the time to look out for them, because they might simply be people.”

“But that could mean we’re *all* ghosts at noonday, so I don’t think you can be right,” argued Timothy, determined to keep the conversation on a light and frivolous note.

“We’re all ghosts to one another, anyway,” said Alison, suddenly disturbingly serious.

“What an outrageous idea!” He laughed and kissed her.

“It isn’t really, you know. In a way, I think it’s at the bottom of all good ghost stories.”

“Ghost stories? Ah, my sister is the family artist in that direction. She has a splendidly blood-curdling collection, the choicest gems of which she trots out on Hallowe’en when the children have gone to bed,” said Timothy, his mind all the time on the disquieting affair of the mysterious box of matches. The outside doors had been securely fastened and the bedroom door, somewhat to his surprise, had a new spring lock on it and so could not be opened from the outside without a key. He supposed the Gees might have one, but he could not imagine either of them sneaking in at night to present him with a box of vestas.

“Do you know the shortest ghost story in the world?” asked Alison, turning away from him to pull a pillow behind

her back.

"I know three," said Timothy, quietly sneaking the box of matches underneath his own pillow.

"Let's swop, and see who wins," suggested Alison, comfortably settling herself, "Loser gets up and makes the tea."

"All right. You take first knock."

"Well, a woman volunteered to spend a night in a haunted room. She searched it first, then locked the door to keep out practical jokers. As she got into bed a little voice said: 'Now you've locked me in with you for the night!'"

"Yes, that's rather like one of my three, and I think I can match it, but in mine the woman, having searched and locked up, and so forth, just as you said, went to bed and went to sleep. Suddenly something woke her. Well, there was no electric light, same as in this benighted residence, so she stretched out her hand for the matches to light her candle but, before her fingers could fumble for them, the ghost put a box of matches into her hand."

He told this story deliberately. He wanted to find out whether Alison had noticed the poltergeist box of matches on his bedside table. Apparently he had been successful in concealing it in time, for she observed,

"I think you win, because your ghost didn't actually say anything. What's your third story?"

"Oh, a branch which used to tap on the window of a haunted room."

"You can't call that a ghost story! Anyway, why didn't they chop it off?"

"They did. It didn't make any sort of difference. A ghostly branch still used to tap in Morse code: *Dead tomorrow*. They say the haunted person always was!"

"I don't believe that's an authentic ghost story. How would a ghost know the Morse code?"

"That's mere carping. What about cars? What about *The Yellow Buick*? And now, to change the subject, it's

going to take the devil of a time to heat enough water on Great-uncle's calor gas contraption to fill even the most exiguous of baths, so shall we make do with a kettle of hot water, just enough for a lick and a promise?"

"Who's going to make the early tea?"

"Oh, both of us," said Timothy, disinclined to leave her alone, either upstairs or downstairs, in such a disquieting house, and equally determined, for the time being, to say nothing about the mysterious box of matches. "My lighter still functions, thank heaven."

CHAPTER TWO

The Ghost-Hunter

“Drive all hurtful Fiends us fro,
By the Time the Cocks first crow.”

The Old Wives’ Prayer

“Damn!” said Timothy at breakfast in their Cotswold home on the following morning, when he had opened his correspondence. “They’ve changed the date of the midsummer meeting of the Phisbe committee. What a curse that is! I’d got it pencilled in for the fourteenth and now it’s to be the twenty-third.”

“Oh, dear! That’s P.-B.’s middle day.”

“Middle day of what?”

“The end-of-term festivities, darling. I told you she was going to put the various items together this year and make a three-day do of it instead of spreading things out.” She handed one of her own letters across to him. “There are her final arrangements. Are there any special reasons for the Phisbe alteration?”

“Yes. Coningsby says he couldn’t get a quorum for the fourteenth, so he’s had to shop around to find out when enough members can make it. People are always booked up—or pretend they are—when the June meeting comes along. Anyway, he writes to tell me that the twenty-third seems to be all right, that the president and the treasurer can come along, and that, if it suits me, too, he’ll confirm it

with the other members. Which one of Sabrina's functions shall I be missing? The *Macbeth*, I hope."

"Well, no—and there's something more in her letter about that. You'll see what it is when you've read it. She's having the school Open Day, with the tennis tournament, on the twenty-second, the annual fair on the twenty-third, and the sports and *Macbeth* on the twenty-fourth, which happens to be a Saturday."

"You're on the Phisbe committee, you know. How about dodging the fair and coming up to Town with me?"

"I can't very well. I could have got out of being there on Open Day, but the fair is for charity and she's put me down to take a stall. There's something more. She writes to say—in that letter you're holding—that her Lady Macbeth has fallen off a horse and broken a leg, poor girl, and she wants to know whether, at such short notice, I feel I could possibly take the part."

"Hasn't she got an understudy?"

"Yes, but not one who is capable of playing opposite Kilbride Colquhoun."

"Who the devil's he?"

"A professional actor, father of a child in the second form. The girl who's broken her leg had obtained a place at RADA and comes from a well-known family who are all on the stage. Now that she can't take the part this wretched Colquhoun says he won't play opposite a schoolgirl, and P.-B.—usually as obstinate as sticky paper when she's thwarted—actually says she agrees with him and calls upon me to fill the bill. Shall I?"

"My darling girl, it's entirely up to you."

"I ought to back up P.-B."

"I wish I knew how she's managed to raise you to this level of co-operation and obedience! I really must study her technique. Are they doing the whole of the play?"

"No, but there's to be a fair amount of it. It's all in the letter. Couldn't you bear to read it? Then you'll know as

much as I do and, as you probably know *Macbeth* backwards, you'll be able to tell me exactly what I'm undertaking."

"Act one, without scenes two and four," read Timothy aloud, "act two, scene one; act three to the end of scene four; act four, scene one; act five, scene one, and the whole to conclude with Macbeth's famous speech . . ."

"The one you always quote when anybody mentions your *bête noire* Mrs. Miles . . ."

". . . at the end of the fourth scene in act five. Hm! Sounds as though Macbeth and his lady will be carrying the can with a vengeance, doesn't it? That means you and this Colquhoun fellow, I suppose, if you take the part. I see she calls it the sixth form play! A fat lot the sixth form are going to have to do with it! All the chief parts seem to be taken by men—or are they boys from a neighbouring school?"

"I expect they're fathers and elder brothers of the girls. She believes in roping in the friends and relations. As for calling it the sixth form play, well, I suppose it *was* that, in the good old days before she had to put girls in for the public examinations. When she started her school the pupils didn't go on to Oxford or Cambridge, they went to be 'finished' abroad, and at school nothing much was expected of them except French and music and a smattering of this and that. It's different now. They expect to have careers until they marry, and after they're married, too, many of them, so they have to get their 'A' levels like everybody else, and that means they haven't time to learn and rehearse long parts in the sixth form play."

"So now she brings in outsiders to fill the bill."

"Yes, and gives the girls the bit parts."

"The three witches?"

"I suppose so, and attendants and soldiers and all that sort of thing."

"I suppose you'll have to spend a good deal of time at rehearsals between now and the twenty-fourth."

"Yes, I'm afraid I shall. There are only about three weeks. I'm afraid I'll have to—more or less—live at the school."

"How do you really feel about it?"

"Frightened but keen. I've always wanted to do Lady Macbeth. I don't know what it will be like playing opposite a professional, though."

"He'll probably be a ham."

"Oh, I do hope not! That would be worse than playing opposite a star! Anyway, you really don't mind if I write back and say I'll do it? I must say I'd rather love to."

"Anything which pleases you delights me."

"You know," said Alison, "you're really much too sweet to be a husband."

"Well, let's pretend I'm not. Then we could have a forbidden love affair, all clandestine and exciting. I think we will! Married blues banished for ever! When in doubt, begin all over again! Come here, and let's jump the gun!"

They left their Cotswold home immediately after lunch and drove to Purfleet Hall School. This was a very fine Georgian mansion on the outskirts of the village of Monkshood Mill in the county of Dorset, and Alison had spent the years before her marriage on the school staff as senior history mistress—the seniority a tribute to her attainments, not her age.

The formidable Miss Pomfret-Brown, apprised by telephone that morning of their imminent arrival, was waiting to receive them.

"Knew you'd oblige me if you could," she said to Alison, "and as I know you can twist this Adonis of yours round your finger . . ."

"Oh, hush!" said Alison, laughing. "He doesn't know that yet."

"Oh, doesn't he?" said Timothy. "What's all this about Macbeth being a professional actor?"

“He’s a rather nasty feller named Colquhoun,” replied Miss Pomfret-Brown. “Lives somewhere in Suffolk or Essex, but is stayin’ with some shady friends of his on the other side of Peterminster, so he’s quite handy for rehearsals and I don’t need to put him up here, thank God. He’s what these actor-types call ‘restin,’ so that’s why I was able to get him. ’Phoned him for an extra rehearsal as soon as I got your message, and he’s comin’ over first thing in the mornin’ to have a run-through with Alison. Strikes me as a boorish kind of person when he ain’t turnin’ on the charm, so I don’t want her to stand any nonsense from him. He ain’t Sir Laurence Olivier—now, good luck to him, a lord—although he’d like to think he is.”

“He sounds rather terrifying,” said Alison, “and I’m frightened to death already.”

“Nonsense! You’ll make rings round him. And don’t accept *his* view of your part. He’ll hog all the fat if you let him. You play it your own way, even if I *have* had to let him act as producer. Tell him to go to hell. He owes me for last term’s fees.”

On the following morning Timothy took leave of his wife and his hostess, knowing that Alison would not want him there for her first read-through with the up-and-coming Kilbride Colquhoun, and, having advised her, in a metaphor she understood, not to accept any wooden nickels, drove back to a home which, since his marriage, seemed lonely and unattractive without her.

He lunched at leisure and then rang up Coningsby to tell him that he could manage the twenty-third, but that Alison could not. He got the date confirmed and then sent for his horse and rode moodily over the common and, as his mount ambled along, he thought about his wife and wondered how she was shaping opposite a professional actor. Alison rang through that evening and said that she had met Colquhoun and did not like him.

"Then for goodness' sake throw in your hand and come home," said Timothy. "I don't mind saying I'll be glad to see you."

"I'll stick it out for a couple more days, darling. The rest of the men are quite attractive."

"The rest of the men? Those fellows whose names are on the programme?"

"Yes. There's one called Eaves who takes Banquo, another called Downwell doing Ross, somebody named Brock as Angus, and playing Lennox is a man of about twenty-five. I don't know his name, but he collected me most adroitly when I slipped on P.-B.'s horribly well-polished boards as I was hurrying along to rehearsal, and saved me from hitting my head against a door."

"Present my compliments and offer him his choice of weapons. Sure you're not hurt?"

"No, I'm quite all right. He plays Rugby Football and picked me out of the air as neatly as I'm sure he intercepts a loose ball."

"Probably from a forward pass when the ref's got mud in his eye! Well, what happened then?"

"He laughed and put me down and steadied me and said: 'You must have patience, madam.'"

"Oh, well, I'll forgive him a lot for that. Quite smart, to quote from the play on the spur of the moment. What did *you* say? I hope you thanked him nicely and told him I'll have his blood? How dare he lay hands on my wife!"

"I said: 'Where are these gentlemen? Come, bring me where they are.' That happens to be from the play, too, if you know it well enough to remember the quotation. By the way, how are you getting on? I almost forgot to ask."

"I'm *not* getting on. I'm pining away, if you want to know. This place is a morgue without you, and Mrs. Nealons says I'm going off my food. It sounds as though you've made up your mind to stay on at the school until this binge is over. Is that so?"

"Yes, I can't do anything else. I do wish, though, that someone else could play Macbeth. Colquhoun is a bit of a ham. You said he would be."

"Well, get your Rugby footballer friend to lay him out. If he can field young women as they fly through the air, he ought to be tough enough to account for a ham actor. What's he like to look at, this Lennox Romeo of yours?"

"Not as tall as you, darling, and not nearly so good-looking. Not to worry about him. He's . . ."

"Blunt-featured but honest?"

"I was going to say he's red-haired. I've always loved red-haired men. They're unpredictable, and I find them fascinating."

"And I'm utterly predictable, I suppose."

"Oh, yes. Bossy and arrogant and supremely sure of yourself. Quite detestable qualities, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Rather reassuring ones, on the whole."

"Stop flirting with me over the telephone!"

"How do you want your fillets o' beef done, sir?" asked Mrs. Nealons, his cook for the past ten years, appearing just as he had put down the receiver. "Perhaps you'd like 'em rare, as the mistress isn't here to want 'em medium."

"Them? You speak in the plural, Mrs. Nealons."

"I 'ave orders from the mistress to see you eat, sir."

"I bet you have! All right, let's have 'em nice and bloody. I shall go over to look again at my inheritance this afternoon and will spend the night there. Back tomorrow for dinner, though. Say about eight o'clock."

"Very good, sir. Shall I bring the early peas in 'ere for you to shell, sir? You always liked shellin' the early peas, and they're reely lovely this year."

As it now seemed certain that Alison would be obliged to remain for the best part of the next three weeks in

residence at the school, it was necessary, Timothy thought, for him to find some agreeable way of passing the time until the Phisbe committee meeting and the performance of the scenes from *Macbeth*. Another visit to Warlock Hall seemed to offer travel, employment, and a change of scene. The house nagged at him with its lonely ugliness and its trivial, significant mysteries.

He saw no reason to apprise Mrs. Gee of his intended visit. He had the keys; the four-poster bed, he presumed, would still be aired; as for the strange manifestation of the box of matches, he decided that it would be far easier and more satisfying to track down the ghost without having Alison on the premises. In spite of flattering himself that he had a modern outlook and a firm belief in the absolute equality of the sexes, his instinct was still to clap the women and children under hatches when danger or the unforeseen was in the offing. Alison, married to him, had soon been obliged to give way to this outmoded point of view, since she had discovered it to be so deeply intrenched that it was beyond her power to move or alter it.

"Bossy, arrogant and supremely sure of yourself." Timothy grinned as he shelled the peas which Mrs. Nealons had brought in. For some reason, Alison's words reminded him of an episode in his schooldays. He had been sent to his housemaster for creating some sort of disturbance, the details of which he could not remember. (He had gone to a school where the older boys were no longer allowed to punish the younger ones, except surreptitiously.)

"Well, Herring," his housemaster had said, "you are an intelligent boy, on the whole, and I find you comparatively harmless. I shall allot you four strokes instead of the usual six."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Timothy, aged fourteen. "I will remember that, sir, when I am housemaster and have your grandson in my care. I will

temper the wind for him, as you are being kind enough to do for me, sir."

"My grandson?"

"Well, yes, sir. I don't think, considering your age and mine, sir, that I am likely to be lucky enough to be housemaster to your son, sir, so, of course, it will be your grandson, sir."

"Herring, rash youth, do not try me too high!"

"Indeed, sir, such was anything but my intention. I was merely thinking that *noblesse oblige*, sir, still has a meaning, even in this degenerate age."

"I fear, Herring, that you will come to a bad end. You are glib, boy, and glibness is a criminal attribute."

"I don't think I'm glib, sir, and as to becoming a criminal, sir, well, actually, I expect to have a carefree life and a happy marriage, and you can't really have those things in prison, sir, can you?"

"As I have no experience either of marriage or prison life, I cannot answer you . . . Oh, for goodness' sake, take fifty lines, and get out!"

"Thank you very much, sir. Your grandson . . ."

"Look, Herring . . ."

"Oh, yes, sir. Thank you very much, sir. I was only going to say that your grandson will be perfectly safe with me, sir, because by that time, sir, corporal punishment will be completely out of date. We have to move as history dictates, sir, and your leniency on this occasion . . ."

"Herring, your life, intrepid child, is in your own hands! Flee, boy, flee!"

Timothy grinned as the episode came back to his memory. Old Trafford had been made a bishop, he remembered, and well deserved the honour. Incidentally, Trafford had neither chick nor child, and neither had his pupil ever become a housemaster. Timothy drove his car into Stroud, topped up with petrol and set off across

England for Warlock Hall and its (possibly) ghostly occupant.

It was turned half-past two when he left the garage. He was not particularly concerned with finding the shortest route, as he did not intend to reach his destination until fairly late in the evening. He stopped for an early dinner in Cambridge and reached Warlock Hall at just after sunset. There were no lights in the gatehouse. He had brought Alison's small car, so he drove slowly under the archway, parked the car in the courtyard, and walked up to the front door of the Hall.

Having inserted the key and pushed the heavy door open, he listened intently, but, hearing nothing, he left the door ajar and returned for a bottle of whisky and the eggs and bread and butter he had brought with him for his breakfast. Then, having entered, he deposited his provisions and made a tour of the house. It presented one or two new features. In the undercroft several palliasses stuffed with straw and provided with moth-eaten rugs had been laid side by side on the stone floor, and in the two bedrooms on the further side of the library camp beds had been set up and were furnished with blankets and pillows. Another camp bed, similarly accommodated, was on the minstrels' gallery landing, under the window.

"Hardly necessary equipment for ghosts!" thought Timothy. "Is Warlock Hall a doss-house for tramps, or are the Gees planning a family reunion or something? This is extremely odd, and, together with the ghost, needs looking into." It occurred to him that on his last visit lack of time had prevented him and Parsons from exploring the second floor of the mansion. Jabez had referred to the rooms up there as attics housing a collection of junk. However, one man's junk is another man's treasure trove, Timothy reflected. He had brought with him a powerful torch,

preferring its steady and brilliant light to the flickering and uncertain illumination provided by candles.

By its light he explored the floor he was on, but there was no way up from it to the floor above. Jabez had told him as much, but he wanted to convince himself that this was so. Being assured that it was, he went down to the great hall by way of the newel stair, traversed its length, and, in the wall of the screens passage, found the door which opened on to the back stairs. These were narrow and spiralled upwards until a sudden bitter chill in the otherwise close atmosphere caused him to believe that he must be level with the minstrels' gallery.

He continued to climb upwards until he came to another door. It opened on a latch and he passed through to find himself in a wooden-floored room which contained two palliasses similar to those in the undercroft. The other rooms—there were five of them—opened one out of another, for there was no passage and each room appeared to take in the width of the great hall, but, except for the one by which he had entered, they did not seem to be in use as sleeping quarters, but contained the junk which Jabez had mentioned. One item which could scarcely be classed as junk was in the furthest room. It was an almost new divan bed.

Timothy intended at some time to sort out the various items and to investigate the contents of a number of bales, trunks, sacks, and boxes which were housed on this otherwise unremarkable floor, but he decided that this was a task which demanded daylight. The palliasses, the divan, and the camp beds, however, were a different matter. The smuggling in of illegal immigrants had become a lucrative form of employment, and the lonely situation of Warlock Hall would be a godsend to smugglers, especially as there was such easy access to it from the creek. He decided to explore the possibilities. He got into his car and drove towards the water.

The road was no more than a narrow causeway over the marshes, but the surface had recently been made up—possibly, Timothy thought, by Jabez himself, for the work was solidly amateurish—and the width was barely enough to take a car. Of passing-places there were none, for the marshes extended implacably on either side of the way and the sedge and reeds which bordered the route were sufficient indication that any deviation would be unwise. Of two cars approaching one another, one would have to back as far as the river bank or the other almost as far as the gatehouse of Warlock Hall before they could pass. The minor road, by which Timothy, with Parsons, had first approached the mansion, was useless for his present purpose, for it ran northwards from Warlock Hall to the village with the Norman keep, and only one short lane led down to the river.

The causeway turned out to be less than three-quarters of a mile long. He parked the car at the far end of it behind some derelict sheds beside a broken jetty, and locked it and walked back to the Hall. By the time he reached it the evening was darkening (so far as the clear sky would permit of actual darkness) into night. Somewhere across the marshes a church clock shuddered out the hour. There was a light in the gatehouse upper window, indicating that Mrs. Gee was at home. Timothy wondered whether Jabez was with her and, on impulse, decided to find out. Nobody, he thought, except her or her son, could have been responsible for putting the surreptitious box of matches on the table in the state bedroom, and he could not help wondering how either of them had managed to get into the house, since he remembered distinctly that, apart from locking the outer door, he had shot the bolts.

The inference was that one of them had already been inside Warlock Hall when he and Alison had gone to bed, and the thought was not reassuring, considering Mrs. Gee's statement of her superstitious fears. Timothy did not intend

to mention any of this to the Gees, however, preferring to solve any mysteries connected with the house by his own wits and not by questioning mother or son, because, whatever their motives, their actions came under suspicion, especially since he had seen the palliasses and the other beds, and had discovered the existence of the derelict jetty. Ruinous as it was, a boat could tie up there, he reasoned.

The door in the side of the gatehouse archway was unlocked, as Timothy discovered when he lifted the latch. This was surprising, again considering that Mrs. Gee claimed to suffer from nervous fears, but it occurred to him that the explanation was a simple one. She had left the door on the latch so that Jabez, who must be out on his lawful or unlawful occasions, could get in without bringing her downstairs to answer the door. There was another stout door at the top of the gatehouse staircase, he remembered.

What job or jobs Jabez carried out down on the Hard had not been specified. As for the broken jetty, it did not give the impression that it was very often visited. Apart from the derelict sheds behind which Timothy had parked the car, there was nothing but a pot-holed stretch of asphalt bordered on the waterside by uneven flagstones, and the ruinous wooden jetty had several missing planks and a broken handrail. Timothy decided that Jabez must have been referring to some other place of work when he mentioned the Hard and his work with boats.

Then he remembered that he and Parsons, as they approached the Hall from the north-west, had pulled up in the one lane which led to the river and seen numbers of small yachts, sailing dinghies, and motor-cruisers at moorings—all the kind of pleasure craft, in fact, of the Suffolk and Essex creeks and the Norfolk Broads. As for the creek near the Hall, the absence of roads over the marshes might explain the lack of summer visitors, he supposed, added to the fact that, except for the dangerous rickety

jetty and an occasional stunted willow growing almost in the water, there was nowhere for a boat to tie up, and nothing to see, and nowhere to go except to the Hall, and he did not think that his great-uncle would have encouraged visitors.

Switching on his torch, for he had taken it with him to the car and retrieved it after he had parked behind the rotting and disintegrating sheds, Timothy, having reached the gatehouse, walked up the stone stair.

"Be that you, Jabez?" Mrs. Gee called out, as she opened the nail-studded, gaol-like door at the top and peered out. "You be back early, beant you?"

"It's Mr. Herring," Timothy called up. "I found the door unlocked, so I thought I'd save you the trouble of coming down to let me in."

"Which it is very kind of you, sir," said Mrs. Gee, appearing, "though I don't never bolt the outside door, sir, this one at the top being very addicate." In spite of the comparative lateness of the hour, she was fully dressed and was wearing Wellington boots. "I thought as Jabez wouldn't be along just yet. But I thought as how you'd gone away, sir. I see you drive up, and I see your car-lights as you druv off. Is there anything as I can do for you, sir?"

Timothy decided that he would not mention the jetty.

"Yes, if you'll be so good. I've had to park my car down the road because I need to tinker it up a bit," he said, improvising rapidly, and beginning to enjoy himself. "I wonder whether you can lend me a screwdriver? I ought to have the right size in my kit, but I remember now that I took it out to do some small job in my garage, and I suppose I forgot to put it back in the boot with the other things." He told these lies with bland assurance, and smiled guilelessly at her.

"This way, sir, if you'd like to look in the tool bag. This floor did used to be one big room, as I expect you guessed when you and your lady come through the other day to go

up on to the roof, but Jabez partitioned it off so's I could have the bigger 'alf with the fireplace and enough room for me bits and pieces as well as me bed, and he could 'ave the other bit when he's able to come 'ere to sleep of a night to keep me company."

She opened a cupboard underneath a small dresser and pulled out a workman's tool-bag. Timothy laid out the contents and picked up a screwdriver.

"This seems to be the fellow I'm needing," he said. "I won't keep it a minute longer than I can help. I'll put it down just inside the lower door when I've finished, well out of the way, so that your son won't tread on it when he comes in, and then I need not trouble you again."

"Which I should not wish you to trouble *yourself*, sir. We can easy 'ave it back when you comes this way again, or, if it's your wish, sir, you can keep it and welcome, so you gives me a few pence, just to satisfy my boy, sir, seein' as you seem to 'ave mislaid your own tools, sir." Her tone was civil enough, but her suspicions were obvious.

"Well, as I don't know when I shall be down this way again, that might be a good solution, if you're sure your son won't be lost without the screwdriver," said Timothy, equally suspicious of her and particularly of her eagerness to make certain that he did not return to Warlock Hall that night.

"Oh, it's as much mine as his'n, 'aving belonged to 'is poor father gone before 'im," said Mrs. Gee. She accepted Timothy's ten pence, handed over the somewhat rusty tool, and showed him to the door. His errand, if not his lies, had paid off. Mrs. Gee was going to remain at the gatehouse and Jabez was expected. What the significance (if they had any significance) of her Wellington boots might be he had no idea. Probably she had been on some errand across the marshes earlier in the day and had not troubled to change into her slippers, he inferred. That she might be going out

again that night he thought unlikely, although it was possible.

Screwdriver in one hand, torch in the other, he passed under the gatehouse archway and took the direction of the road in case Mrs. Gee should be watching out of the upper window to see him go. He followed the road towards the village, walked a couple of hundred yards to give her time, if she was watching, to conclude that he had taken himself off, and then he doubled back on his tracks, sneaked under the gatehouse archway and walked across the courtyard up to the front door of the house. He had no fear that he would be spotted from that direction, for the gatehouse windows looked out only on to the road and the marshes. Nothing of the courtyard or the mansion could be seen from Mrs. Gee's eyrie unless there was a watcher on the roof, and this was most unlikely.

He inserted his key, pushed open the heavy door which was set in the Norman stone arch and paused to listen. The old house was silent. It was an eerie silence, but at least nothing creaked, groaned, or scuttered. Timothy switched on his torch and entered the great hall. It was empty and was as silent as the rest of the building. He passed through it and entered the chamber which had the oriel window. There was nobody there. Suddenly his nerve was momentarily shattered. The grandfather clock in a far corner whirred noisily, cleared its throat and, while Timothy's heart returned to its accustomed place after the initial shock, it solemnly struck eleven.

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" said Timothy, apostrophising it. "I thought you were the ghost of Warlock Hall!" Considerably shaken, he left the clock to its vigil and climbed the spiral stair.

CHAPTER THREE

Exit Macbeth

“I’m free from thee; and thou no more shalt
 heare
My pulling Pipe to beat against thine eare:
Farewell my shackles, (though of pearle they
 be)
Such precious thraldome ne’r shall fetter
 me.”

To Love

The momentary shock which his nerves had received from the bronchial grandfather clock had a stimulating effect on Timothy. He explored the rest of the house, including the attics, almost blithely, returned to the front door, locked and bolted it, made certain that the garden door and all the downstairs windows were secure, and had just returned to the four-poster bedroom and stretched himself on the bed, intending to turn in when he felt like it, when he became aware of voices on the floor below him. “Enter the ghost of Banquo, after all,” he said to himself. He put on his shoes and crept to the door. The visitors, he deduced, must be in the great hall, since he could hear their voices so clearly. They were conversing in somewhat strident tones and an argument appeared to be reaching the belligerent stage.

“I tell you we got to find somewheres else.” This was the voice of Jabez Gee, and it was raised in angry protest.

"I don't want them at my place. Why can't we go on using this?" asked a second voice, in injured but cultured tones.

"They come here, I tell you, the noo owners. No tellin' when they might not turn up again," Jabez impatiently explained, "and an 'igh-nosed feller 'e was, and don't you make no mistake about that. Give you the back of 'is 'and as soon as look at you."

"You could pass the word to Jankers, couldn't you, if there's any danger in landing the cargo?" This was a third voice, fruity, rich, and beautifully produced.

"Well, Mother could, but, with the noo owners about, what if we was to be rumbled? What then?" demanded Jabez.

"Clear out, and leave the customers to do the best they can. They don't know our names, or where we come from, or anything else about us. They couldn't let us in for anything, that's certain. If we need to abandon them, they'll simply have to take the rap, that's all." The voice was less fruity and there was an impatient rasp in it this time.

"That's all *you* know. The game ain't worth the candle. Why, the owner might turn up again any time, and, anyway, 'e's goin' to sell up, and then where shall we be? E's been over 'ere this very day, if you want to know. My mother told me."

"We're going on with it, just the same," said the second voice. "A spice of risk rather adds to the fun, don't you think? Besides, if we don't carry out our assignments, where's the rest of the money coming from, apart from the fact that we've got those poor devils to consider?"

"Take the money and chance the consequences. We can always leave them to it, as I keep telling you," said the third fellow, mellifluously again. "Don't be a fool, man."

So there were three intruders in the house, thought Timothy, and the three included Jabez Gee, if he could be

called an intruder. There was a fourth, somewhere or other, it seemed—a man named Jankers. It was also clear that Timothy's suspicions were amply justified in that something illegal was being carried on, using Warlock Hall as a base. Timothy's instinct was to descend the newel stair, confront the visitors, and demand to be told their business, but two things caused him to stop and think again. Jabez was a powerfully built fellow and his companions might be equally strong and tough. In a fight (if it came to that) the odds of three to one were pretty formidable and this age of the early 1970s was one in which, all too often, might was right and the Queensberry Rules were at a discount. Moreover, the situation of the house was remote and lonely, and not even Alison knew that he had gone to it. He had told Mrs. Nealons that he was going to his inheritance, it was true, but, so far, she knew nothing of the actual address of Warlock Hall.

On second thoughts, therefore, he decided that his best plan would be to try to get a look at the two strangers so that he would recognise them again, and then wait until the morning, tackle Jabez on his own, and try to bully him into confessing what the game was. In that almost deserted, marsh-ridden countryside, with a navigable creek at hand, there was no doubt that some form of smuggling was being carried on. With the Norderney Islands and also Amsterdam only just across the water, it could be diamonds, dope, or illegal immigrants.

"You pays your money and you takes your choice," Timothy said to himself, "but I rather think the conversation plus those palliasses gives the game away."

He took off his shoes, but carried them under his arm. With infinite caution he began to creep down the stairs to the hall.

There was a door at the foot of the stairs and it was open. He had known that it must be so, otherwise he could not have heard the voices come up to him so clearly. As he

held his breath and rounded the last turn of the spiral stair, he could see a flickering light. He put his back against the side wall and craned his head round. The light came from two candles which were in bottles on the heavy hall table. The flickerings shone on the three seated figures so that they looked like a conversation piece in an old Dutch painting.

Jabez, his powerful shoulders hunched and his elbows on the table, almost had his back to the staircase, but Timothy recognised his long, untidy thatch of hair and his workman's hands. Another man was at the head of the table and had his back to the fireplace, so that he was presenting Timothy with his left profile. It was that of a Roman emperor, sensual, coarse, and fleshy, with a high-bridged nose and a full, cruel, double-chinned jaw. Facing the staircase was the third man, his countenance fully illuminated by the candles which were on the table directly in front of him. He had a bony, boyish face, a long-lipped, humorous mouth and his clasped hands, on which his square chin was resting, were long-fingered and sensitive.

Timothy summed the three men up and decided that the odds were against him. "Caesar" could probably be accounted for easily enough. One good punch in the diaphragm would double him up. Jabez was a different proposition and as for the youngest man (a d'Artagnan, maybe) he looked lean and hardbitten enough to be able to hold his own, even without the help of the hulking Jabez. All the same, Timothy disliked the thought that his premises were being used to bolster up nefarious enterprises, and, disliking even more the feeling that he himself was ineffectual, he began to wonder whether, if he could not fight the intruders, he might at least contrive to frighten them. He did not care to make a move while the men were silent, so he remained where he was and waited. Jabez was the first to speak.

"I could do with some sleep," he said. "The tide won't be right for the landings for three hours yet. What say we kip down for a bit? No point in sittin' here chewin' the fat with each other."

"Those damned camp beds!" complained "Caesar."
"What's the matter with my taking the four-poster?"

"Because we'd never get you out of it," said the youngest man. "Besides, if the owners come back—and Gee thinks they will—they'll expect it to be as they left it."

"Sheets can be changed, though, can't they?"

"And who's to change 'em, with Mother goin' over to me auntie's tomorrer and the owners maybe comin' back any old time?" demanded Jabez truculently. "You leave the four-poster be. Anyway, you'll be luckier than the other poor devils what have to make do with them sacks I laid down in the basement. Jankers on'y spoke of five, but, in case there's more, I've made up two kips in the attics. Any others can shake down on the floor."

"One of us ought to be down at the creek," said the tall, thin man.

"Not for a good two hours, and even at that there'll be time to kill," said Jabez. "They'll 'ave to fetch up on the tide, I tell you, and that's three hours away."

There was a general pushing back of heavy chairs. Under cover of the noise, Timothy climbed the stair, went into the state bedroom for his torch, made his way through the shadowed library, and emerged upon the minstrels' gallery. Here, hidden behind its solid oak front, he gave vent to an ear-splitting whistle. To his astonishment, and (it must be admitted) to his panic terror, from the other end of the gallery he could have sworn he heard a terrified cry. The effect of both sounds upon the conspirators varied according to their nature and upbringing.

Jabez gave a yell and raced for the opening which led into the screens passage. The heavy thud of the front door indicated that he had vacated Warlock Hall by the shortest

route which lay open to him. The lean young man picked up one of the candles, shone it towards the gallery, and shouted out, "You jolly well stay where you are! I'm coming up!" "Caesar" dashed the other candle to the stone floor, rushed towards his companion, seized his candle from him, and flung it down as he yelled, "Don't be a fool, man! It may be the bobbies! Let's get out of this!"

"Oh, no, we don't! It's some damned snooper, and I'm going to get him," shouted the thin young man. Timothy could only guess at what was happening, but there was a crash and a yell of pain, followed by curses, and then the thin man shouted, "All right, you fat rabbit, scram, then!"

Another door slammed and then there were footsteps. The thin man was blundering up the spiral stair. Timothy left the minstrels' gallery, stole through the library, and waited outside the further door. It was pitch-dark at the top of the stairs, but he had his torch. He flashed it in the intruder's face, then dropped it and lashed out. The man, however, was taller than he had allowed for, and the blow landed only on his chest. It was heavy enough, however, to cause the fellow to stagger backwards. He fell part-way down the stair and Timothy raced back through the library to the staircase by the minstrels' gallery, thinking to waylay his quarry in the hall.

In his haste he had not remembered that this interloper of a staircase did not really belong in the house, and at the foot of it he found himself confronted by the blind passage of a cul-de-sac, and by the time he had turned himself about he heard the sound of a car. Reaching the front door, he was only in time to see some tail-lights before the thick mist which now covered the marshes swallowed them up.

He found himself extremely reluctant to return to the house, and in no mood to investigate the eerie and uncomfortable business of the cry he thought he had heard. However, a complete disbelief in psychic manifestations soon came to his aid. He switched off his torch, crept into

the hall, gazed up towards the musicians' gallery, and said, in a voice much louder than he had intended: "It's quite all right. You can come out now, whoever you are. They've gone." He waited and listened, but the silence was uncanny and absolute. He switched on his torch again and received, momentarily, a shock. As he played the powerful beam over the table and floor, he saw that there were dark, wet stains on both. The three men had not been drinking. He picked up one of the candles from the floor and felt the stickiness on his fingers. Hastily he dropped the candle on to the table.

"Good lord!" he said aloud. "It must be blood!" Then the obvious explanation came to his aid. In the darkness, when the two men had collided, one of them must have sustained a blow on the nose. Timothy retired to what seemed to have been his great-uncle's quarters, washed the blood off his hand, and wondered what he had better do next. He felt no inclination to return to the musicians' gallery, although he told himself that the cry he thought he had heard must have been either a figment of his imagination borne of the excitement of the evening or have come from one of the men.

He felt no great urge, either, to remain in the house for the night, although he did not suppose, after their panic flight, that the three men would return straightaway. The thin one had spoken of "my place" in a way which appeared to indicate that it was somewhere in the neighbourhood. If it was, the chances seemed to be that they would make it their headquarters, at any rate for the night. What they would do with whatever was to come in on the tide he did not attempt to guess. Their simplest plan would be to leave it on board the incoming ship until it could be disposed of. They would be far too wary to bring it to the Hall that night. In any case, some sort of action on his own part seemed to be called for. If the men *did* return—especially if the cargo they were expecting was human,

alien, and illegal—it would be madness to allow them to find him in possession of the house with the clear indication that he, and not the police, had overheard their conversation. On the other hand, he felt that he could not bear to make a tame departure without finding out a little more about what was going on.

After a pause for thought, he let himself out of the house and went back to the ruined jetty. If something clandestine was afoot, and an illegal cargo was to be landed, the deserted quay was the obvious place at which to land it. He knew that the men had fled in another direction, but he concluded that as soon as they found they were not being pursued they would try to keep whatever appointment they had with the ship which was to come in on the tide.

Timothy settled himself in his car to watch and to listen. The night itself was warm, but the high ground-mist which blotted out the marshes and lay like static smoke over the river made him wrap himself in one of the rugs which he kept on the back seat. There were times when he had to will himself to keep awake, but the hours passed, somehow or other, and by three o'clock in the morning—he looked at his luminous watch—there had been no sound of a boat.

At dawn he drove back to the mansion, crept in, listened intently, and then stole upstairs to the state bedroom. Here he again stretched himself on the four-poster bed, and slept until ten in the morning. He got up, sluiced himself at his great-uncle's living room sink, heated some water on the calor gas stove for shaving, and made himself some breakfast. After that, he made another thorough survey of the house. The coagulated blood on the floor and table of the great hall, the overturned chairs, and the candle-grease were the only witnesses to the presence of the intruders.

“Good morning, sir,” said Mrs. Gee, meeting him on his way out. “Why ever didn’t you let me know you was a-coming back? I would have gorn in and made you a bit of supper and your breakfast. Couldn’t you get your car to go?”

“No, I had to spend the night in her,” said Timothy. “I came back to get a wash and brush-up and something to eat. I’m going to have another shot at tinkering with the car now. It was too dark last night. A bit creepy, too, I thought. I’m glad you had your son with you. It must be lonely when you’re left on your own.”

“Jabez, sir? Oh, but Jabez wasn’t with me last night. He was over to Ipswich on business.” She sounded frightened, Timothy thought, and no wonder, since she was telling at least one lie.

“Oh, really?” he said carelessly. “I thought I saw him walk past my car last night. It must have been his ghost I saw and heard, and two other ghosts were with him.”

“As to that sir,” said Mrs. Gee, turning an obstinate but terrified countenance towards him, “I did give you fair warning, sir, as Warlock Hall was ‘aunted.”

“So you did,” said Timothy, perceiving that he was going to get no more out of her. “So you did, Mrs. Gee. What I have to find out now is who or what it is which seems to haunt it.”

“Ah, that we shall never know, sir.”

“You think not? Ah, well, time will show,” said Timothy.

“Was you thinking of coming down again, sir?”

“Oh, yes, of course, but I have no particular plans. It might possibly be tomorrow, or it might be next week or the week after. Anyway, we shan’t need to bother you while we’re here, except that we’d like you to carry on with the cleaning. My wife will see to the food and so forth, and I shall be bringing along my gardeners to clear up the courtyard and the garden. Can’t hope to sell the place in its present state, and I want to get rid of it quickly.”

"I see, sir. So you'll be stayin' 'ere off and on, and your men, sir. Very good, sir. I trust the ghosties won't cause you no more trouble, sir." Her frightened tone had changed to a slightly spiteful one.

"Oh, there is always a rational explanation of hauntings, and I am a firm non-believer in ghosts," said Timothy pleasantly, "so I don't think they will be troublesome." Brave words, he said to himself, but what of the poltergeist matches and the mysterious cry he had heard? Whatever Jabez Gee was responsible for, it seemed hardly likely that he had sponsored, at any rate, the latter. To avoid giving Mrs. Gee the impression that he had been spending the night opposite the broken jetty, he took his former direction towards the village, hung about for half an hour, and then returned to his car.

When Timothy reached home there was a message from Alison pencilled on the telephone pad. It was to the effect that a halt was to be called to rehearsals to give the cast a break. There would be a rehearsal on Friday afternoon but not another one until the following Tuesday.

Timothy rang up the school and got Alison on the telephone. She would be able to come home for a long weekend, she said, if Timothy would pick her up at some time on Friday evening.

"But couldn't I come to the rehearsal?" asked Timothy. "I'd love to see how you are shaping."

"You can come and act as prompter, if you like. Half a minute. Here's P.-B."

Miss Pomfret-Brown ordered him to come to lunch on Friday, stay to tea, and take Alison home in the evening, unless he would prefer to stay the night at the school.

"Been havin' fun, you dreadful feller?" she asked.

"Lots and lots of fun," Timothy replied, "but not of the kind you mean. Tell you all about it when I see you."

"Been to that moated grange of yours again?"

"And how! All the news on Friday. Thank you ever so much for inviting me."

"Alison's lookin' peaky, that's my reason."

"Macbeth not treating her to enough of the fat?"

"Don't talk to me about Macbeth!" exclaimed Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Tell you about him anon. Don't forget to come to lunch on Friday, half-past twelve sharp. Mind you behave yourself until then . . . Yes, of course Alison's all right. Pinin' for you, of course, but otherwise perfectly well. I was only pullin' your leg. Knows her part, too, which, so far, the rest of 'em don't."

"But where on earth did you get all those magnificent men?" asked Timothy, when Friday's lunch and rehearsal were over and tea was being served on the terrace outside Miss Pomfret-Brown's magnificent drawing-room windows. "Don't tell me they're all related to your pupils. And, if they are, and if it's not an improper question, why aren't they taking tea with us after their exertions?"

"Didn't want to be lumbered with 'em, and anyway the gals like to entertain 'em in the sixth form common room. They're all relatives of sorts, or relatives' friends, and Fiona MacLeod's in charge, so nothing will get out of hand. What did you think of em'?"

"As actors?"

"Yes."

"Well, they were anything but word perfect, as you indicated and, of course, I didn't see your Macbeth. That disappointed me very much."

"The slacker cried off. Pleaded a previous engagement, but will turn up next week without fail. One thing, he knows his words backwards, I'll say that in his favour."

"Michael would train on, and I'd far rather play opposite *him*," said Alison. "I dislike Kilbride intensely."

"Michael? Kilbride?" Timothy raised his eyebrows. "Has it come to first names already, then?"

"Oh, we all call one another by our first names," said Alison. "I was asked whether I minded, and I do, rather, on such very short acquaintance, but I was afraid of sounding unfriendly and stuffy, so, of course, I said I would be delighted. It doesn't include the schoolgirls who are taking part, thank goodness."

"And which was the lad who fielded you so brilliantly the other day?"

"Michael, of course. Didn't you notice he had red hair?"

"I guessed he was the one. He's got doves' eyes where you're concerned. I wouldn't mind betting I can guess his surname, too."

"Yes, he's Sandra Davidson's brother."

"I'm more than ever sorry I've missed Colquhoun," said Timothy to Miss Pomfret-Brown. "What did you mean the other day, my adored Sabrina, when you referred to his shady friends?"

"Didn't mean anything. Just hate the man, that's all. He's the kind of sneakin' smarmy feller who *would* have shady friends. Wouldn't have had him in the play if I could have got anyone better, but felt I had to have a professional for Macbeth and he's the only one who happens to have a brat on the school books. Should have had to pay anybody else, and I expect *he* would have insisted on a fee, but fortunately he owes me money, as I told you."

"What would you like to do this week-end?" asked Timothy, as he and Alison drove northwards and westwards towards their home that evening.

"Let's go and take another look at Herrings, shall we?"

"No," said Timothy flatly. So far he had told her nothing about his experiences at Warlock Hall. "For one thing, I'm not going to waste time this week-end in driving over there, and, for another, it's going to rain."

It did rain, so they spent a quiet Saturday, Sunday, and Monday indoors and on the Tuesday afternoon, directly after lunch, Timothy took Alison back to Monkshood Mill.

"Had a 'phone call from blisterin' Macbeth," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Is sendin' the school fees and optin' out of the play."

"Oh, really?" said Alison. "Did he give any reason?"

"Oh, did he not! Felt that he couldn't work with amateurs, especially an amateur who wouldn't take direction. That's you, my dear gal. What have you done to upset him? Not that I care if you have!"

"One: refused to allow him to chuck me under the chin; two: refused to make the 'Give me the daggers' speech his way, and said I preferred my own; three: pointed out—quite tactfully, I thought, but I simply had to do it—that he was putting the wrong emphasis on his words in one or two places and making nonsense of Shakespeare's meaning, besides murdering the rhythm of the lines."

"Golly!" said Timothy. "I'm not surprised the poor devil opted out! I wonder he didn't offer you violence, but it's just as well he didn't. It's saved me from having to murder him."

"It's just as well he's gone, in any case," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "I've come to the conclusion that to employ one professional in a cast of amateurs is to put a pike among the goldfish. Anyway, as it's all Alison's fault we've lost the pukin' feller—not that I blame her!—she can amuse herself coachin' up young Davidson and I'll have to find a gal to play Lennox. That's all there is to it, thank heaven."

"Couldn't I play Lennox?" asked Timothy. "The only day I couldn't be here is the twenty-third, and that isn't the day of the play. If young Davidson is to play Macbeth, I want to be able to keep an eye on him. I don't approve of red-haired youths who snatch my wife out of mid-air and then have the nerve to quote chunks of the play at her."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Creek

“When that day comes whose evening says
I’m gone
Unto that watrie Desolation;
Devoutly to thy Closet—gods then pray,
That my wing’d Ship may meet no Remora.*
Those Deities which circum-walk the Seas,
And look upon our dreadfull passages,
Will from all dangers, re-deliver me,
For one drink-offering poured out by thee.”

His Sailing from Julia

“My dear fellow,” said the president of the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest, “what on earth induced you to begin mucking about with boats?”

“*Messing* about *in*,” said Timothy. “Oh, Alison seems keen, so I thought I’d better buy one.”

“I hope this doesn’t mean that you’ll be taking her on the river instead of turning up at the next committee meeting?”

“Oh, no, I shall be there. Besides, Alison is all tied up at present with amateur theatricals.”

“Is she? Well, but, if a boat at all, why a powered cruiser? What’s the matter with sailing?”

“Oh, winds and tides, just winds and tides.”

“You lazy devil! Oh, well, as you’ve got me down here, I suppose I may as well look your white elephant over. But I warn you that boat-owning is a chronic disease and quite incurable. It’s like leprosy used to be in the Middle Ages. The boat-owner is fit for no other society than that of others similarly afflicted. I ought to know. I’m one of the plague-stricken myself, except that I do have the decency to own a yacht and not one of these noisy, racketeering monstrosities such as yours.”

“Oh, come now,” protested Timothy. “The engine merely purrs like a well-fed cat. She roars as gently as any sucking dove. Come aboard, and you’ll soon see.”

“It makes no difference. You are a Philistine, Timmie.”

“I had another reason for buying a boat, apart from Alison’s wishes,” said Timothy, pouring drinks in the cabin before they cast off. “I’m informed that a jetty, (which I will point out when we leave this mooring and go downstream) derelict and rotting though it be, belongs to Warlock Hall, and it seems a pity not to make some use of it. I don’t tie up there at present because I want to get it repaired. Besides, I have a suspicion that, since my great-uncle’s death more than a year ago, it has been used by a gang of smugglers, and I’m rather anxious to catch them at their tricks without their catching me catching them.”

“Smugglers? What are they bringing in? Dope, do you think?”

“Illegal immigrants, I fancy.”

“Poor devils! They’re relatively harmless, most of them.”

“I know, but I don’t want them here. I have more than another suspicion, too. I believe they’re bedded down and hidden away in Warlock Hall until work-permits can be forged for them, and I don’t think that’s good enough. I’m not prepared to be landed in the jug, and that’s what it might mean if I harboured them. I imagine it’s like being a receiver of stolen goods.”

Timothy, although he had been more or less in the neighbourhood, had not slept at Warlock Hall since his last visit. He stayed two nights a week at the school to take part in rehearsals and brought Alison home for week-ends. What with that, and buying and trying out the boat, he had found himself short of any leisure in which to try conclusions with the smugglers, but he had imported gardeners and maintenance men of one sort and another, and had been down several times to see them at work.

The two men finished their drinks and cast off.

"Downstream first, I think," said Timothy. "I'm rather keen to find out how this boat behaves in the tideway, but I thought I'd like to have an expert on board before I tried her out."

"I shall be happy to be drowned in your company. Is the river tidal as far up as this?"

"Oh, no. There's very little tide on this river at all. There are sand-bars all across the estuary, and they seem to control the flow—not that I know much about it. Ah, there's the old jetty I mentioned. You can see what a poor state it's in. All the same, I think my gentlemen use it. It's so handy for the house." He pointed. "That's Warlock Hall, and an ugly devil of a house it is!"

The house stood up, a landmark over the marshes, gaunt, squat, and menacing. Its elongated, writhing chimneys were a caricature of the beautiful stacks and pots of their Elizabethan period. The president trained field-glasses on the building and looked at it from varying aspects as the cruiser followed the bends of the winding creek.

"Some time," he said, "when it's convenient, I think you'll have to invite me to look over it."

"I hoped you'd stay long enough to have a look at it today, but I suppose you've got to get back. I'd have liked you to see it before my chaps get busy tidying it up, but

they begin next week, and I suppose you couldn't get down here again before then?"

"Afraid not. By the time we tie up I think I shall have to leave you, and then there's the committee meeting to prepare for, apart from a school prize-giving I've promised to attend, complete with speech and compliments, and an Old Boys' reunion and a couple of formal dinners at which I'm supposed to be the guest of honour."

"See what it is to be famous and in demand! Will you take over the controls? She only needs two and a half feet of water, so we shan't run aground unless you turn her into the bank."

Apart from the illimitable sky, there was nothing to see but the marshes, their vast expanse and unending sameness broken only by an occasional windmill or the incidence of a small stream or an even smaller brook meandering its way towards the river. There were sedge and rushes in varying shades of green and russet and, as the boat drew nearer to the estuary, fields of sea-lavender turned to a dull grey-green, the sea-level saltings.

At the last bend of the river before it reached the island there was a slight change in the scenery. To starboard the salt-marshes became a chessboard marked off by little rivers, but to port there was a small park on an unexpected rise. Among its trees a compact Georgian house could be seen and, in line with it, seeming to be not more than half a mile away, another of about the same size and date. Between them, on the riverside in the middle of the last bend, was a wooden jetty in good condition and with a motor-cruiser, larger than Timothy's own, moored alongside.

The president took the left-hand fork round the island and the boat went almost due north along an arm which skirted more of the sea-marshes. At the northern tip of the island he said regretfully,

“Afraid we shan’t get right out to sea today. I see by the chart we’ve another five miles or more to do before we get to the end of this channel and round the sandbank. I suggest we circumnavigate the island and leave the rest for another time.”

As they rounded the point, the flat and strangely-shaped island was to starboard, while on the port side, between the boat and the open sea (which was plainly visible from the deck of the cruiser) stretched the five-mile spit of the sandbank which the president had mentioned. Through the glasses Timothy could even see the end of it, where, at Blithe Weir Point (as it was marked on the chart) the narrow mouth of Warlock Haven entered the bleak North Sea.

The president brought the boat through the choppy water where the two streams met at the southern base of the island, and at the head of the creek they cruised at about five knots between the close-set banks of the river. Once past Timothy’s broken jetty, the scenery became less monotonous. The sunshine slanted golden on the side of a distant church tower. Small boats, tied up to willows, were reflected in shimmering water. Woods came down to the river. There were mallards, a family of swans, the dipping white heads of sooty-feathered coots, and an occasional water-vole which, disturbed by the boat, left a bubbling wake and widening ripples as it swam across the water to the shelter of the oozy bank of the stream.

The river wound and turned. Occasionally a tributary, not much wider than a brook, entered it in an overshadowing of reeds. In the distance there was a farm, and beyond it the landscape became less uniformly flat. More woods, slight rises sustaining pasture, another farm, and, further off, a village, came into view. At a white-painted mill, where a notice gave warning that, beyond it, there was insufficient depth for vessels drawing more than two feet of water, Timothy put about and the cruiser came

downstream again on the almost imperceptible flow. Timothy's rented moorings were about a mile and a half up-river from the broken jetty which belonged to Warlock Hall, and were on the same side of the stream. He and the president disembarked and walked a couple of hundred yards or so to where they had parked their cars.

Before he took his leave, the president looked around him and then gazed downstream towards the estuary.

"So Alison likes this countryside?" he said. "I'm rather surprised. It's not much like either Dorset or the Cotswolds, is it?"

Timothy looked out over the marshes and up at the illimitable sky. On the ground were great patches of marsh-ragwort, blisteringly yellow, tall reeds with leaves like swords and ragged heads like fluttering, tattered pennons on the ends of broken lances. There were osier willows, stunted greyish alders, some curious pink flowers of which he did not know the name, and, over all, the relentless, enormous bowl of blue and grey, the unending, incomprehensible, and strangely luminous sky of the East Anglian countryside.

"She does like it here," he said. "She wants to spend part of the year at Warlock Hall. She wants to re-name it *Herrings*. But I don't know, I'm sure. So far, I hate the place. Apart from the house itself, which is not only as ugly as sin but is probably steeped in it as well, there's such a damned draught in the place. So far, I haven't traced its origin. In fact, it isn't so much a draught as an area of bitter cold which seems to seep into your bones and leave you half-paralysed."

"Sounds like a haunting," said the president lightly. "Is Warlock Hall supposed to house a ghost?"

"According to the caretaker, yes, it is. Personally I couldn't care less—well, not much less"—he remembered the cry which had shaken his self-confidence about ghosts

—“but I must find out what causes this cold spot and put it right before we can think of staying in the beastly place.”

“Let me know how you get on. Well, see you at the meeting on the twenty-third. Love to Alison. Good-bye.”

Timothy stood back and watched until the president’s car was out of sight, then he returned to his boat and tidied up, poured himself another drink, and then thought of driving home. By the time he went into the cockpit again he had changed his mind. He made himself some supper and then found himself with an urge to go to Warlock Hall and find out whether it was tenanted again by the three men. If it was, he thought he would go to the police in the morning and complain that Warlock Hall was being used by squatters. The palliasses were proof enough of this for all practical purposes. He could give Jabez’s name and a pretty accurate description of the other two. It would then be up to the authorities to take such steps as seemed good to them, and the matter of the smuggling, if that was what the men were engaged in, would be investigated.

By the time he had come to these conclusions the sun was beginning to set over the marshes, and was reflected in lurid red and deep gold in the cuts and ditches. The river was already filling up with cotton-wool mist and the evening was turning chilly. Timothy put on a dark sweater and an anorak, pulled the monk’s-hood cowl of the latter over his head, picked up his heavy torch, left the cruiser, and drove to the decrepit jetty. He parked his car again behind the sheds and set off on the three-quarter-mile walk to the Hall.

There was a lamp in the gatehouse window, so he approached cautiously and slipped quietly in under the archway. There were no lights. Not even a flickering candle was showing from the mansion, so he felt reasonably certain that it was untenanted, since it was still too early for anybody to be asleep. However, to make doubly sure, he crept round the entire outside of the house before he

put his key in the lock of the front door. The fact that it was not bolted increased his confidence that nobody except the ghost (if it existed) was inside.

Torch in hand, he began to make the rounds of the stark, forbidding mansion. The air, especially on the minstrels' gallery, seemed even colder than before. Moreover, as he stood on its threshold, he was startled to hear the sounds of somebody moving about. He stood very still and held his breath. After about ten seconds, as near as he could judge, he heard the sounds again. He listened, straining his ears. How long he stood and waited he hardly knew, but his first uncomfortable reaction was soon replaced by a mixture of amusement and annoyance. The damned cheek of it, he thought, to be using the house again as a base so soon after he had disturbed them!

"I think we'd better have a show-down," he said to himself. Very quietly he nipped down the balustered main staircase, traversed the cul-de-sac passage into which it led, and followed its open end until he reached the short screens passage. In his great-uncle's living-room there was an umbrella stand in which several of the old gentleman's walking-sticks had been left. Timothy tried each one of them for weight and, having selected the heaviest, made his way back to the gallery. He paused on the threshold and listened again, but the sounds were not repeated. Only one person, he judged, had been moving about, but it did not follow that only one alien presence was in the house.

Prepared for trouble, but determined to confront the intruder or intruders, he gripped the heavy stick and, torch in his left hand, he began his search by descending from the great hall into the undercroft. Here his first surprise awaited him. The palliasses had all disappeared. The stone floor was as bare as when the builders had first laid it down. He flashed his torch into every corner to make certain of this, but every vestige of beds and bedding had gone. He went quietly up the spiral stair again, inspected

the state bedroom in which he and Alison had slept, paused to listen for a repetition of the sounds he had heard, but could distinguish nothing.

He had received an impression that the sounds had come from the minstrels' gallery, so he made that his next objective. Creeping through the library, he gained the landing from which the straight Tudor staircase descended, and stood at the entrance to the gallery. He allowed his torch to play on its walls and on its solid front and was again aware of its extreme coldness. In fact, as he stepped on to its boarded floor, it seemed to him colder than ever, and, what was more, he thought he could feel the icy blast of a knife-like draught. It blew about his head, from which he had pushed back the hood of the anorak and, looking for its origin by the light of the torch, he spotted a finger-width opening in the panelling of the back wall.

"This house becomes more interesting as time goes on," said Timothy, under his breath. "A bolt-hole of sorts, no doubt."

He inserted four fingers when he had laid down his walking-stick, and pulled hard. Without a sound, a sliding-door came back and he could see a stone floor broken by a flight of steps. He knew that the flooring must be on the top of the screens passage, but where the steps could lead was a mystery which could only be solved by trial and possible error. He picked up the heavy walking-stick after he had pulled the hood of the anorak round his head again and descended the steep flight of stairs. At the bottom of these was a tiny landing with a door to the righthand side of it, but there was also another flight of steps. Making a mental note of the position of the door, he went on down.

"Talk about Alice and the rabbit-hole," he thought, "I wonder whether I'm dreaming?"

At the foot of this second flight of stairs was a passage which sloped gradually upwards. The further end of it was blocked by another door, but this, he found, when he

played his torch upon it, could be opened from the inside. Beyond it the passage widened out to form a small, square, compact room containing a cupboard, a two-tiered bunk, a camp bed, and a large bucket. Two tin hats of the type sold to civilians during the war lay on the topmost bunk, and in the cupboard were three civilian-type gasmasks. Timothy had come upon his great-uncle's air-raid shelter.

He felt let down, in one sense. The stairs and passages held no secrets, after all. They were simply a war-time safety measure. The passage, however, continued for perhaps ten yards or so until it reached yet another door. This had a two-inch circular hole in it through which, by the light of his torch, Timothy could see the iron latch going across on the other side of the portal. He inserted a forefinger, lifted the latch, opened the door, and found himself confronted by one more flight of steps. At the top of these another door, which could be opened by the same simple means as the last one, brought him to the top of the gatehouse stairs—in other words, to what was the entrance to Mrs. Gee's partitioned-off rooms.

"So that's how the milk got into the coconut," thought Timothy. "So easy, when you know how. No need to be seen entering the mansion by the front door. I suppose Jabez—if it was Jabez I heard—slipped back to the gatehouse this way." Determined to carry the matter further, he hammered on the stout and nail-studded door. A scared Mrs. Gee opened it, the light from behind her outlining her homely cottage-loaf figure.

"Who is it?" she asked. "If it's Jabez you're wanting, he ain't 'ere."

Timothy realised that his own figure was in darkness and that, to her, his face was probably no more than a white blur. For this reason he believed her assertion, but decided that he would make doubly sure.

"Oh, dear," he said. "I was rather counting on him. I'm in a spot of trouble again. My boat this time."

“Oh, it’s you again! Well, you did give me a start! Anyways, I wouldn’t have thought you could do much about a boat at this time of night,” said Mrs. Gee, sharply. “But, there! It’s no business of mine. Jabez is away down the creek. You’d ought to know that.” It was clear to Timothy that she had not recognised his voice. She must have mistaken him for the tall, thin, young man whose accent was much the same as his own.

“Why ought I to have known it?” he asked. This time she appeared to realise who he was. She spoke in a startled tone.

“Why, bless us all, if it isn’t Mr. Herring! I do beg your pardon, sir, I’m sure. I was mistakin’ you for a mate of my boy’s which I was ‘alf expectin’. What can I do for you, sir?”

“Nothing, if Jabez isn’t available,” said Timothy. “The fact is that I’ve been trying out my new cruiser, and I think something has fouled the propeller.”

“That river do be full of weed, sir, but not even Jabez couldn’t do nothing for you in the dark. You don’t seem to be one of the lucky ones with machinery, do you, sir?”

“No, I’m afraid I’m not. All the same, if I could have a word with Jabez just to explain what the trouble is . . .”

“Which you cannot do, sir, my boy bein’ absent from ‘ome on ‘is lawful occasions.”

“Oh, I see. Well, that’s a blow. When do you expect him back?”

“Which I could not put upon myself to say, sir. It might be tonight, but I don’t reely think so. Tomorrow evenin’, at the very earliest, is what I would charge myself with supposin’, if I was asked to make a stipulation. Was you thinkin’ of spendin’ the night at the ‘All, sir?”

“Possibly. There’s nothing I can do about the boat until I get some help. I thought Jabez might like the job, but if he isn’t available first thing in the morning I’ll get somebody at the moorings to see to it.”

“The ‘ud be best, sir. Well, I don’t know what I’m thinkin’ about, keepin’ you standin’ at the door. If you’d care to come in, sir, I’ll make you a nice cuppa cocoa.”

“No, I won’t stay, thanks very much.” He was anxious to get back inside the Hall. If it had not been Jabez moving about on the first floor, he had an overwhelming desire to find out who it was. He shone his torch, clattered rather noisily down the inside stone stair of the gatehouse, banged the outer door, and then waited in the shadow of the gatehouse archway. Having allowed enough time for Mrs. Gee to settle down, he climbed the stone steps again, noiselessly this time, and returned to Warlock Hall by way of the air-raid shelter and the minstrels’ gallery. The sliding door which he had left open was now shut.

“So there *is* somebody here!” thought Timothy. “If it isn’t Jabez, who is it?” He made a careful search of the first floor and the ground floor, for the sliding door had opened easily enough, but found no trace of any intruder. The obvious explanation seemed to be that whoever it was must be up on the attic floor and was probably one of the immigrants. Oh, well, the police could be informed later on. Illegal immigrants were their business, not his. He walked back to his car, deciding to drive home through the night, and was about to unlock the door to the driver’s seat when he heard the sound of a boat’s engine. He peered out from behind the shelter of the sheds and could make out a dark shape moving downstream towards the estuary.

The craft, whatever it was, was moving without lights, but in the dimness he thought he could make out that it must be a cabin cruiser of a type common enough higher up the river not to excite remark or any particular interest. Had it carried lights he would have thought nothing of it, unusual though it was to move so small a craft down-river instead of leaving it moored for the night. However, with his suspicions of the smugglers in the fore-front of his mind, he left his car, took the road to where he had moored his

boat, embarked, and followed in the wake of the other boat towards the sea. There could be one good reason, if he was right about the smuggling, for it to be beating against the tide, which must be running nearer the estuary, and that was to meet a ship which was coming in on the flood.

He had no hope of overtaking the other cruiser. He continued the chase, however, cutting out his own engine at intervals and listening for the sound of the quarry, but only for a matter of seconds each time, for his boat, as it reached the tideway, yawed and fell away, slapped at and slewed sideways by the incoming water. Four times he cut out in a distance of about a mile and a half, and the fourth time, keeping his craft's head to the small waves which now came rolling in, he had the satisfaction of hearing the engine of the other boat. He let his own craft drift towards the bank, fending her off with the boathook from actually going aground, and while he was doing this the engine of the other boat stopped.

There was only one place, so far as he remembered from the map, where a ship could have tied up, unless she was braving the shoals where the creek parted to include the island he and the president had circumnavigated, and this was at a stretch of hard known as the Old Quay. It was probably still in use, because there must be (he thought) sufficient depth of water on that side of the channel to take ships of fairly considerable draught. Possibly, however, the Old Quay was more of a shelter in bad weather than a place to unload cargo, for again, according to the map, there was no longer a road to it which was suitable for lorries.

The creek had broadened. At the last bend it had been almost a quarter of a mile wide. Timothy's first thought of running out past the Old Quay as though he intended to put to sea he soon abandoned, for he had thought of a better and a far less dangerous idea. He would find out whether it was possible to tie up at the landing-stage which

he and the president had noticed on their trip after they had rounded the island, and which seemed to belong to one of the Georgian houses they had seen. From there, having switched off his lights, he could follow the other cruiser if she came back, and find out where she was heading for. The alternative, that of continuing to the Old Quay, boldly tying up near the two vessels, supposing they were there, and watching what they were up to, he dismissed almost as soon as he thought of it. The spot was lonely, there might be more than one man on the cruiser and a crew of three or more on the ship, if ship there was. Besides, nobody knew where he had gone and the deep silt of the marshes would soon hide any trace of his body should he be unlucky enough to fall foul of desperadoes, and Jabez Gee, at any rate, would not stick at much, if Timothy had read him rightly.

He had already passed the landing-stage opposite the Georgian house, so he put about, found the place deserted, tied up, and put out his lights. He went into the cabin, filled a pipe, poured himself another drink, and settled down to wait and listen. Sure enough, it was not more than twenty minutes or so before the sound of an engine came to his ears and a motor-cruiser, still without lights, passed him, going upstream. He gave it a full five minutes and then cast off and followed it. The tide was still running in, and the ship, if there was one, was waiting, he supposed, for it to turn.

Timothy was not slow, as a rule, in making up his mind about a course of action, but on this occasion he was far from certain what his next move was going to be. Much depended on whether his hunch was correct, that Jabez and his friends were in the cruiser and that their night errand was nefarious. He took his boat along at not more than his usual five knots and was not in the least surprised to find the other cruiser (as he supposed) lying moored at the Hall's decrepit jetty where he had left his car. He pulled

over until he was only about a yard from the opposite bank and continued upstream until he had rounded the bend, then he put his boat across the river, turning her as he did so, cut out the engine, and quanted her along until he reached a couple of willows. Here he drove her nose into the soft bank, tied up, and, with his torch to help him, made soggy tracks on foot towards the broken-down sheds behind which he had hidden his car.

He was banking on another hunch—that the people on board the other cruiser had gone ashore. He hoped that this was so, for his squelching progress towards their boat on the oozy bank of the creek was far from noiseless. He reached the shelter of the sheds, felt firm ground under his feet, and made a cautious reconnaissance. There were still no lights on the cruiser. He had only made her out as a black hull when he passed her. He approached her with extreme caution, and was soon in no doubt that she was untenanted.

“Taken her cargo, whatever it was, up to the Hall,” thought Timothy. “Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound.” He put his torch in his anorak pocket and strode out in the thickly-misted night to where his formidable inheritance confronted the steaming marshes.

There was no longer any light showing from the gatehouse and he was already under its archway when he saw a man leaving by the front door of the Hall. Timothy had two choices; either he could flatten himself against the gatehouse wall, hoping that the fellow would unwittingly pass him by in the blackness, or he could step out and confront him. He decided upon the bolder course, having the comfortable feeling that the odds, if it came to a punch-up, ought to be in his favour, as he would be taking the other man by surprise.

“Hullo, there!” he called out. “Is that you, Gee? Do you happen to have a key on you? My car’s broken down again,

so I'll have to spend the night here, and I don't seem to have my key with me."

"Why, good evenin', sir," said Jabez, obviously startled, but speaking in a mild and civil tone. "Oh, yes, sir, I got a key. Mother and me both got one. She've kep' the big four-poster aired, sir, against you and your lady takin' a fancy to come 'ere again for a night. I'll let you in, sir, and then I'll rout Mother out to make you a bit of supper."

"Oh, don't trouble her," said Timothy. "I've had some dinner." They went to the front door together and Jabez unlocked it. "I'll be off before breakfast," Timothy went on, "so no need to disturb anybody in the morning. What took you up to the Hall so late? Anything wrong?"

"Oh, no, sir, nothing wrong. I thought I spotted a light and went across to investigate, as it were, sir, but I must a-been mistook. There wasn't nothing."

"Oh, well, good of you to take the trouble."

"Wasn't no trouble, sir, Mother bein' caretaker, as you might say . . . Oh, thank you, sir, I'm sure, but there isn't no call for you to give me nothing. I was only doin' my dooty, sir, when all's said and done."

Timothy went into the house. He remained in the screens passage and waited and listened. Nothing was to be heard and he was disinclined to explore the rooms again. He concluded that the sounds he had heard before must have been made by Jabez, for there was nothing to show that he had been the occupant of the mysterious, unlighted cruiser. When Timothy went for his car at dawn to return to his Cotswold home, the other cruiser had disappeared. He stopped at his up-river moorings and arranged for his own boat to be collected from the willows.

* *Remora*—pronounce *Remoray*. A fabled fish having the power to delay ships by using a suction pad on the top of its head.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rumours of Wars

“Nor are thine eares so deafe, but thou canst
heare,
(Far more with wonder, than with feare)
Fame tell of States, of Countries, Courts, and
Kings;
And beleieve there be such things:
When of these truths, thy happyer knowledge
lyes,
More in thine eares, then in thine eyes.”

A Country-Life

After Timothy's experiences, one way and another, at Warlock Hall and on the river estuary, the next few days seemed somewhat of an anti-climax. His instinct was to haunt the Hall by way of giving it a second and perhaps (as he put it to Alison later, who recognised the quotation immediately and was rude about it) an individual and bewildering ghost, but this fanciful and romantic plan was scuppered because of the Phisbe committee meeting which, after his promise to the president, he felt bound to attend.

It was a meeting which never contrived to attract the full strength of the membership and he arrived at it somewhat late, owing to a traffic hold-up on the Great West Road. The meeting, in any case, had been kept mercifully short, and by the time he got to it the president, realising

that the members were anxious to get away in order to enjoy the long summer recess, had arrived at the stage of *Any Other Business*.

Certain that there would be none, he was in the act of gathering his papers together, preparatory to declaring the meeting closed, when a mild, spectacled young man who was seated at a separate table where he had been engaged in taking down the minutes, rose and said diffidently,

“Well, yes, Mr. President, if you don’t mind.”

The young man who thus astonished and somewhat exasperated the other members, who had been hoping to get away early, was not the official secretary. That honorary post was held by Timothy Herring, but the more boring tasks appertaining to the office were performed by the meek and spectacled young Coningsby, who was handsomely paid for being saddled with those chores, such as taking down the minutes, keeping the archives, and sending out notices of meetings, which Timothy declined to carry out.

The Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest, known to its members as Phisbe, was an influential and wealthy body, generously endowed, and its membership fees were on a sliding scale for which a species of means test had been adopted. This was in order that knowledgeable, hardworking, but indigent persons should not be deterred from placing their talents at the service of the society, and that wealthy dilettantes should be encouraged to subscribe heavily to a worthier cause than any they might have been able to devise for themselves.

Whatever the president’s personal feelings may have been at this unexpected prolonging of the meeting, he accepted the interruption with a charming smile.

“Oh, really?” he said. “All right, my dear chap, go ahead.”

Coningsby cleared his throat and glanced apologetically at those who were seated at the long table.

"They want to put an end to Lady Matilda's Rest," he said, "and I don't think we ought to let them."

"Was it hot in London?" asked Alison, when she and Timothy were together again in the luxurious guest-room which Miss Pomfret-Brown had allotted to them at the school.

"So-so. It was clever of you to have accepted Sabrina's invitation before the date of the committee meeting was changed. How did the Open Day go?"

"Well, it went, and that's about all I can say. I shall opt out next year, if I'm invited. Most of the girls I taught have left, and there have been several staff changes. I was a fish out of water until the evening. It was all right then. I spent it gossiping with P.-B. in her quarters after a more than adequate dinner."

"I trust that my adored Sabrina was in her usual health, and delivered her usual speech to the parents in her usual inimitable manner?"

"Yes. Of course she's cross with you because you wouldn't duck the committee meeting and attend her Open Day. She said that if *I* could, *you* could, and she never listens to explanations. She made her usual speech to the parents, but with a significant addition. She astounded them by saying that she proposes to use the south wing of the house next term as a preparatory school for boys."

"Never!"

"Yes, indeed. There are to be three resident masters, to begin with, and others will be added as the numbers warrant this. The boys will take most of their lessons with the junior girls, but she's bespoken a large field just up the road for the boys' games and is building them a workroom

where they can learn carpentry and how to do useful jobs about their homes.”

“Glad I’m not their parents! But do you think she’ll get any boy pupils?”

“Oh, yes. Everything she touches succeeds.”

“Bless her enterprising old heart! May her shadow never grow less!”

“Well, it won’t, unless her appetite fails or she goes on a diet. I may have more to tell you about this prep. school scheme later on. She hasn’t fully worked it out yet. So now, to change the subject, is it to be Madeira for our holiday, or would you prefer the Dalmatian coast?”

“I’m glad you brought that up. The answer, melancholy but unavoidable, is that it’s possible it won’t be either.”

“That means something cropped up at the Phisbe meeting. How sickening! Can’t it wait until the autumn?”

“I don’t know yet. Look, let’s get into bed and then, if you’re not too sleepy, I’ll tell you all about it.”

“I’m not sure I want to know, if it’s going to upset our summer holiday. Will you put off telling me until after the play tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course. I don’t want you brooding about Madeira and the Dalmatian coast while you’re supposed to be planning the murder of Duncan.”

“You know, the psychology in the play is all wrong. It wouldn’t have been a bit like Shakespeare says.”

“Don’t you think so? I can quite understand Macbeth’s going from bad to worse. Evil deeds do tend to make people disintegrate. It just becomes one damn thing on top of another. Once you begin you’ve got to go on.”

“I know, but I don’t believe Lady Macbeth would have cracked up in the way she did. She was made out to be much the stronger character.”

“Not with her husband seeing the ghost of Banquo and all that. And she’d lost her own children, it seems—there’s a reference to her having “given suck”—so she may have

been horribly affected by the slaughter of Macduff's wife and babes."

"Oh, don't let's begin discussing the play tonight. And don't say I started it. I know I did, and I'm sorry. Now tell me about the committee meeting. I think I'd like to know, after all, what has killed our summer holiday."

"Oh, no need to jump to conclusions yet. It was young Coningsby who took the pin out of the bomb, and in the most dramatic fashion, too. Have you ever heard of Lady Matilda's Rest?"

"No, I don't think I have."

"Nor had I, so I was somewhat at a loss for words when Coningsby announced that somebody is going to put an end to it."

"That sounds most intriguing. Do explain."

"All right. It's not a long story, and the thing which interests me—well, one of the things—is that Lady Matilda's Rest is situated not so very far from Warlock Hall. In fact I think I spotted it when the president and I were cruising up the river."

"*Herrings*, darling, not Warlock Hall. What a coincidence, though, so please go on. I love your bedtime stories."

"This is rather a grim one, not so much for us as for the old ladies who are concerned in it. Lady Matilda's Rest is a charitable institution with rather an interesting history. According to Coningsby, Lady Matilda's Rest was originally a small mediæval monastery housing twelve monks and a prior. It was supported largely by a pious local lord who made it his contribution towards a seat among the cherubim, and at that time it was called Saint Cuthbert's. At the Dissolution it went the way of all flesh, of course, and the buildings and land were sold to a man called Carlege, who handed them over to his wife, the Lady Matilda of the present title. She turned the thing into almshouses for twelve poor women. She altered the

cloisters so as to build a row of Tudor cottages on one side and, facing them, she turned what had been the monks' dormer into a hospital. The other buildings—a tremendous gatehouse which had been used as the prior's lodging, the stone-built frater, and a small Norman church—she left alone.

“Well, in the fullness of time, the local council acquired possession, but it kept the almshouses going. Now, however, it seems that there's a scheme to pack the old ladies off to various other homes, turn the gatehouse and the dining-hall into a folk-museum, pull down the cottages and the hospital, and turn the land and gardens into a public park.”

“I don't see what's to stop it happening. Maybe there's good reason to condemn the cottages and, if they move the old ladies, there's no longer any need for the hospital, I suppose. What is the setting like?”

“What you'd expect in that countryside—flat and watery. There are two rivers near by—ours and a smaller stream—lush water-meadows, enough land to make part of it into a sports ground with football pitches and a running track, and there's a scheme for making a bathing-place and using a straight stretch of the minor river for rowing-boats and canoes.”

“It sounds like a plan for doing the greatest good to the greatest number. Why is Mr. Coningsby against it?”

“Apart from the fact that it will probably break the inmates' hearts to be separated and sent to other institutions—not that that is Phisbe's concern, of course—he says he's seen the place, and, next to St. Cross, just outside Winchester, which it somewhat resembles, he claims that it's the most complete and delightful set of buildings he's ever seen, and he thinks it ought to be preserved just as it is, and any necessary repairs put in hand by the council, or, failing them, by us.”

"It doesn't sound a bit like a Phisbe job to me. From what you say, it seems that the original mediæval buildings are to be preserved and only the Tudor additions scrapped. Perhaps the cottages ought to be condemned, anyway, as I've already said. They're probably damp and they may be insanitary."

"Granted. Anyway, it won't hurt to go and have a look at them, once the play is over. Coningsby is a knowledgeable chap and absolutely dedicated to our work, so I'm inclined to pay heed to what he says. But now—to sleep. We must give of our best tomorrow."

"Yes. You know, Tim, I can't help thinking and wondering about Kilbride Colquhoun. It's rather worrying, in a way."

"Oh? Any particular reason for saying that? I thought at the dress rehearsal young Davidson was definitely good."

"I didn't mean he wasn't, although he's much too young for the part. I was simply wondering why Colquhoun walked out on us so suddenly. That's what worries me."

"I considered his explanation was more than sufficient. You seem to have pricked his bubble of self-importance pretty effectively. Enough to make any man champ and rear, especially if he's a pro."

"I don't think I was the real reason he gave up the part, though."

"What *was* the reason then?"

"I really don't know. We knew he was going to duck out of one rehearsal, of course. He pleaded private business and gave P.-B. to understand that he'd had an offer to play in America, but there wasn't the slightest suggestion that he was going to abandon us altogether. He was cutting no end of a dash with his boasting the last time I saw him."

"Something must have cropped up during his American audition, then, I should think, and he used your spirited criticisms as an excuse for oiling out. Anyway, let's not

worry about him. Let's get some sleep, so as to be ready for the fray tomorrow."

"I'm glad you're in the play. I wouldn't have seen very much of you, otherwise, during these last three weeks. When we go to Lady Matilda's Rest, is there any chance that we might spend another night or two at Herrings? You said they weren't so very far apart."

"Well, we'd better see how the time goes," said Timothy cautiously. "I don't see why we shouldn't pay another visit to the Hall, if that's what you'd like, but I don't think we'll spend another night there until I've had it vetted for damp and dry-rot and a few such mundane matters, and until I've found out where all those icy blasts come from. I can't think how any house manages to be so chilly at this time of year."

"Ghosts are said to make a place seem cold, and Mrs. Gee told us it was haunted. Of course, I don't believe in anything of the sort, but I retain an uneasy impression that somebody or something came into our room that night. Do you think we need the psychical research people?"

"Bless you, my child!" said Timothy. "Oh, I know what I wanted to ask you." He was anxious to change the subject. "Who's acting as prompter tomorrow, just in case I fluff?"

"You dare to fluff! Anyway, the prompting is all arranged for, so there's nothing to worry about, thank goodness. We take it in turns when we're off-stage. P.-B. has worked out a rota."

"She's not the stage-manager. I thought that was Hildegard Salter, her second-in-command."

"Ah, but if P.-B. does it everybody automatically sticks to her ruling because they're too scared of her to do anything else. Besides, Hildegard has plenty to do without worrying about whether people are suddenly going to dry up in mid-speech."

Macbeth passed off without incident except for two interesting items in a conversation which Timothy heard

during the first interval. It was between Banquo and Ross, who were restoring their energies with the beer which Miss Pomfret-Brown had thoughtfully provided (and strictly rationed) for the refreshment of her gentlemen players.

"Funny about that chap Colquhoun."

"That's not his name, you know."

"Didn't think it was. Kilbride Colquhoun is a bit difficult to swallow, even north of the Border, and I should very much doubt whether he's a Scotsman, anyway. Funny thing about him, all the same."

"How do you mean? Because he opted out of the play? I daresay these amateur things aren't much in his line, as he's a pro., and he was quite enough of a heel to let the rest of us down if it suited him."

"Oh, granted, but this performance happened to be something pretty special for him."

"You mean because he's got a kid at the school?"

"Oh, no, not that. At least, that would only be a secondary consideration to that sort of fellow. No, it seems that the great Pomfret-Brown is in cahoots with Wallingford, the TV producer, and Colquhoun told me that he was bribed into taking on Macbeth with the promise from her that Wallingford would be in front to size him up for the lead in a series they're doing next spring."

"I thought he was going over to the States. Anyway, *is* Wallingford in front?"

"I've no idea. It wouldn't matter to us either way, would it? My only concern is not to make a fool of myself in front of my daughter."

"I'm taking a chance and am sending my boy here next term. You heard what was said about a prep. school."

"Really? Bit of a risk, isn't it?"

"I don't think so. The school will get him through Common Entrance all right. The old lady will see to that. Besides, I heard a rumour that Lady Macbeth . . ." At this point the speaker caught sight of Timothy and broke off.

Following the direction of his friend's eyes, Ross, after a tactful parenthesis, returned to the former subject of conversation.

"Yes, she's marvellously good, isn't she? Got that extraordinary *flair*, like all real actresses, for making herself appear supremely beautiful just at the right moments. But I was telling you about Colquhoun. There must be a reason why he opted out, you know, and I'd like to know what it is. Of course, he's a fishy sort of fellow, by what one hears about him here and there, especially in London, but, with the chance of a lead in a TV series, you'd think he'd put up with anything—and, after all, Lady Macbeth was perfectly polite . . ."

"And perfectly devastating, and that in the most beautiful voice—Oh, hallo, Herring! How do you think it's going?"

"All right, so far," said Timothy. "If one may butt in on a private conversation . . ."

"I was saying what a marvellous performance your wife is putting up, old man."

"And how she got shut of Colquhoun," said Timothy, "according to the bit of your talk I overheard."

"I don't believe—I was just saying so—that she *did* get shut of him. She shrivelled him up all right, but he deserved it. A most obnoxious fellow. Tried to take liberties, you know, for which there was no justification in the text, and I'm glad Mrs. Herring didn't let him get away with them. All the same, I thought it all ended amicably."

"Why, then," asked Timothy, "do you think he threw up his part?"

"Trouble with the police, old man. That's *my* view," said Ross.

"That's not what I heard," said Banquo. "He's too careful to get mixed up with the police, although I *did* hear that, having been pretty much in the red for a number of years—living mostly on his wits with only the occasional

offer of decent parts—he's begun to pay off his creditors with a suspiciously sudden access of wealth for which there's no accounting . . ."

"Well, that could be what I said. He's in trouble as the result of shady doings. I'll bet you anything you like that he's having to hide from the rozzers," declared Ross.

"It could be so," said Timothy, "but have you ever given thought to the psychological make-up of the ham actor?"

"He can't really be such a ham, or the TV people wouldn't be interested," said Banquo.

"That's open to question, of course—that they *are* interested, I mean. To return to what I was saying: if he were in trouble with the police we'd have heard of it through the grape-vine. There's only one thing which keeps a ham actor off the stage, and that is that he simply isn't fit enough to go on."

"There was no mention of Colquhoun's having had an accident. We should have heard about that even sooner than that he was in the other sort of trouble," said Ross.

"I *did* hear about it. He's smashed his face up. Got into some brawl or other, and took a bashing. I had it from a chap in Town who uses the same pub," said Banquo.

"Oh, a *pub* brawl? Doesn't sound much like Colquhoun."

"No. My informant seemed to think it must have been a private fight. In other words, some indignant husband took him to bits and reassembled the pieces. Anyway, there was Colquhoun, all sticking-plaster and head-bandages, according to this chap I met . . ."

"Then he shouldn't have been drinking," said Ross.

"Oh, the head-bandage was probably camouflage to make himself look more interesting. The most likely thing is that somebody who didn't like his little ways busted him on the nose and cut his lip for him and a few things like that.

He'd certainly got the ripest of ripe black eyes, this fellow said."

The girl who was acting as call-boy summoned the actors for the next scene, and the play proceeded to a triumphant conclusion. Alison was too tired that night to be told of the conversation which seemed to account for the non-appearance in the play of Kilbride Colquhoun, so, after the lavish party which Miss Pomfret-Brown gave for all the adult actors, Timothy put his wife to bed, then placed in water her bouquets—one from the staff, one from the girls, one from the rest of the cast, and a particularly staggering offering from young Davidson who had played Macbeth. Then he turned in beside her.

"How do you think it went?" she asked.

"Marvellously, darling. Pity, in a way, that there's only the one performance."

"One is quite enough for me."

"Well, actually, I'm rather glad you feel like that. Now go to sleep."

"What were you telling me about this home for old ladies?"

"Nothing more tonight."

"When are we going to look at it?"

"Whenever you like."

"Well, the sooner the better, then. It will be something to fill the void. I'm going to miss the rehearsals and the rest of the cast and P.-B. and, apart from the agony of wondering whether the play is going to be all right on the night, life seems flat and uninteresting, especially without a summer holiday in prospect."

"We can go away later on in the year. It shouldn't take all that long to settle Lady Matilda's hash."

"Perhaps not, but—well, I've got a hash of my own to settle before September."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Why not now?"

"Because I'm too tired to argue with you, and, besides, I have to pluck up my courage."

"Here, you haven't gone and fallen for young Davidson, have you?"

"Good heavens, no! Don't grip me like that. It hurts."

"I'm sorry. All the same, do you want me to have a sleepless night, wondering what devilment you're up to now?"

"I don't mind, so long as I don't have one, too. It was you who said we ought to go to sleep, so why don't we?"

"You're not going to put me out of my misery?"

"Oh, it's nothing very bad, but you may be annoyed about it for a little while, and I don't want you to be annoyed with me tonight. It will keep. Tell me a bedtime story and send me to sleep."

CHAPTER SIX

Almshouses

“Lord, thou hast given me a cell
Wherin to dwell.
A little house, whose humble Roof
Is weatherproof.”

A Thanksgiving to God for His House

Realising that in her own good time, and not until then, Alison would tell him what was on her mind, Timothy took her home on the following morning and they spent the next couple of days quietly. On the Tuesday, when he had read his letters and had settled down with the morning paper, she said,

“What about Lady Matilda’s Rest?”

“Ah, yes. Coningsby was going to ring up the place and let me know. I wondered how he had got hold of the story, but it seems that the warden is his aunt.”

The telephone call came through about an hour later. Any day and time would be convenient for the warden, it seemed. Timothy suggested that the following afternoon would suit him, and immediately after breakfast on the Wednesday he and Alison set out in the car and took much the same route as he and Parsons had used to get to Warlock Hall.

At the moorings where Timothy kept his boat they branched off for the small town of Horsebridge and then the road followed the river north-westward.

“Tim,” said Alison, “what are we trying to do?”

“I’m dashed if I know. Let’s leave it until we get there, shall we? Now, then, after these crossroads it looks as though we take this next fork. To me, that looks like the tower we were told about, so let’s make for that.

Coming to a few thatched cottages a mile or so beyond the end of the town, they stopped to ask the way, although Timothy was pretty sure that the buildings he had seen from the river were what he now sought.

Lady Matilda’s Rest was about another mile further on and at the end of a short lane. Wide-open wrought-iron gates brought the car on to a broad gravel path bordered by flower-beds backed by high walls. It led to an archway which formed a porch the size of a large room. This supported the square tower of what had been the prior’s lodging. There was a window-aperture at one side of the porch and, as Timothy drew up and handed Alison out, a man’s face appeared at the aperture and its owner said,

“Mr. Herring, sir? The warden got your telephone message and is expecting you. Just half a mo, sir, and I’ll come and show you up. I’m the porter here.”

A door opposite the window-aperture led to a flight of stairs. At the top of these there was another door. It was opened, when the porter knocked, by a grey-haired, thin-faced woman who appeared to be in her fifties. The porter announced the visitors and retreated. The grey-haired woman said,

“Do come in. It was so good of you to telephone my nephew. He said that he hoped you would call to see us.” She took them into a large, square room whose stone walls were hung here and there with some brass-rubbings mounted on linen. There were no other decorations except a vase of flowers on top of a bookcase. A massive table stood in the middle of the room and the only other furnishings were four chairs and an ugly, old-fashioned *éscritoire* littered with papers.

"Your nephew?" Timothy repeated. "Yes, he brought up the subject of Lady Matilda's Rest at our last meeting."

"He said he was sure you would help us if you could. They want to pull us down. It's the wretched town council, you know," said the warden.

"You realise, I am sure, that no decisions rest with me," said Timothy. "I can only make a report, and my report rests largely upon what our architect has to say. Then the property has to be surveyed, of course, and as a result of all these findings my committee comes to its decision."

"Yes, I understand all that. Perhaps you would care to take a look round. This room, and the two above it, are my lodgings."

"I'm told there is no plan to do away with this tower."

"That is true, and the same is true of the great hall and the mediæval kitchen. But the really serious aspect is that the whole character of the place will be changed when the dwelling-houses and the hospital have been demolished and our beautiful little church turned into a place of entertainment. Apart from that, my old ladies will be rendered homeless."

"Surely not? I was told that they would be re-housed elsewhere."

"That is true, but, if you have the time to spare, I will tell you where some of them are to go."

The great hall could be reached by a short stairway which led directly down to it from the tower. It was well-lighted, having windows on both long sides and was furnished with three heavy, primitive tables. There was no dais, but the top table, which was placed across the width of the hall, had two great chairs for seating, whereas the other tables, which were placed lengthwise down the room, provided only backless benches for the diners. The floor was bare and there was a central hearth stacked with logs. Altogether, it was a cheerless place, in spite of the sunshine which picked up bright colours in the unevenly

tilled floor, and (again in spite of the sunshine) the room struck cold.

The kitchen next door was vast, and was saved from grimness by its array of pewter dishes and flagons, its burnished copper pans, its cooking range complete with roasting-jack, and its enormous dresser on whose open shelves were some brightly patterned mugs and plates. There was a stone sink beneath one window and a modern tea-trolley underneath the other, but, like the dining-hall, the kitchen was stone-flagged and chilly.

"There is a rota of cooks," explained the warden, Miss Coningsby-Layton. "They pair off and take turns. Unfortunately they are not all equally good at cooking. Now I'll show you their houses, of which they are very proud."

The houses made a picturesque, dilapidated row. They were half-timbered, consisted each of one ground floor and one first-floor room, and their tall chimneys made a pleasing although somewhat drunken pattern against the blue sky. Outside each front door there was a wooden seat wide enough to accommodate two people, and on one of these benches sat an elderly woman, knitting.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Baines," said the warden. "I wonder whether you would like to show Mr. and Mrs. Herring your little house? They've come to help us."

"Ay, they can go inside, if they want," said the crone, without looking up from her knitting. "Ent much to see."

"Shouldn't you prefer to show your visitors round?" asked the warden, gently.

"Why?" demanded the old woman suspiciously.

"Oh, well!" Miss Coningsby-Layton laughed off the brusque question. The front door was wide open. Timothy stood aside. Alison followed the warden into a tiny room. It contained an armchair, an upright chair, a cupboard, a table, a sink, and a gas-ring.

"I'm not too much enamoured of gas-rings for old people," said Miss Coningsby-Layton. "Carelessness, you

know, and some of them don't see very well. We don't want to start a fire. However, it means they can make themselves a cup of tea if they feel like it, and that means a great deal to old people."

They went upstairs. The tiny bedroom, spotlessly kept, as the living-room had been, contained a bed, a chair, a Dutch wardrobe, and a washing-stand.

"There isn't room for anything more, as you can see," said the warden, interpreting Alison's silence, "but one comfort is that it doesn't give them very much housework to do. They have to go to the pump for water, but they can heat it on the gas-ring if they want to wash in hot water, and for baths they go across to the hospital, where the council have installed two bathrooms. Those are unsatisfactory, though, from my point of view, because the water is heated by gas and I'm so afraid they'll blow themselves up. I've had to make it the porter's job to light the geysers, and the porter isn't pleased about that. Of course, the old ladies hate having a bath, so I have to hound them over there, poor old things. They're on a rota, so that there is no chance of their being able to avoid their hygienic obligations, but it means that I have to be a bit of a dragon. Mind you, I don't let them go straight back across the quad after they've bathed. They go into the ward and get a cup of cocoa from matron. It acts as a palliative, I think, and it also means that they don't come straight from steamy heat into the cold air."

They re-joined Timothy, who had seated himself on the bench beside the occupant and, when they appeared, was picking up a stitch which the old woman had dropped. He concluded this employment and then stood up.

"Are all the houses alike inside?" asked Alison, as the warden led the way back to her lodging.

"Basically they are, but each inmate is allowed to bring one piece of furniture, if she wants to, provided it can be given enough room. Most of them bring their favourite

armchair, although one or two have brought a bed. Then, of course, they can put up a picture or two, and family photographs. We don't get as many texts from the Bible as I believe they did in the old days, and, needless to say, I don't supply any, unless they ask for them."

"What about entertainment?" asked Timothy.

"Oh, you mean television and the radio. I'm afraid the local council won't run to that, but most of the old ladies are in bed by nine o'clock. The electricity has to be turned off at the main at ten, so there's no incentive to stay up."

"What happens if one of them is taken ill in the night?" asked Alison.

"You mean because of having no lights? Thank goodness, since I've been warden, it hasn't happened. They have regular medical examinations, you know, and a very thorough check-up before they are given a place here. Do sit down, and I'll ring for some tea."

When tea was over they were taken to see the hospital and the church. The hospital, which occupied the site of the monks' dormitory, was built over a kind of cloister walk, so that none of it was on the ground floor. It consisted of two wards and a part which had been partitioned off to make quarters for the matron, who was a trained nurse, and from her sitting-room the original flight of stone steps used by the monks led down to the choir of the tiny Norman church.

She led the way down, but was called away by the porter who had admitted Timothy and Alison to the tower, and they were left alone to inspect the church.

"Absolutely unspoilt," said Timothy, as they walked to the back of the small building in order to get the full effect of the Norman chancel arch and the three small Norman windows behind the altar. "Reminds me very much of Barfreton Saint Nicholas. Same arrangement of three very narrow lights at the east end—usually somebody has replaced them with Early English lancets, which I like, or with Decorated Gothic, which I don't—and there's the same

blind arcading on either side of the chancel arch instead of the usual stone or painted screen. Absolutely perfect."

The chancel arch was enriched with chevron and, on its outer arc, with billet moulding, and two grotesque heads, too much the prey of time to be recognisable as anything to which a name could be attached, acted as terminals to the arch and rested on the stone string-course. Below this were the chevron-moulded blind arches to which Timothy had referred.

Alison had walked to the altar rails to look at an early piscina and Timothy had walked back to examine the font, when one of the elderly inhabitants of the almshouses came in and began to dust the chairs which were there in lieu of pews. She straightened herself as Timothy approached the font and cackled, an unlikely sound in such a place.

"Fat lot of good a font be, eh, mister?" she said, not attempting to lower her cracked old voice. "I reckon as us what hev the bad luck to be mewed up in a place like this 'ave done with child-bearin' and christenin's and such."

"I wonder why a font was ever put here," said Timothy, looking at the heavy stone plaiting round the rim of the goblet-shaped basin and the heraldic beasts carved on the bowl. "One has to assume that the original congregation would have had no use for it, either."

"And why do you say that, mister?"

"Because they were monks. This was their church and the chances are that, even in Norman times, they were celibates. The Cluniac reforms aimed at enforcing celibacy in canonical life, and at about the same time the so-called Lorraine movement was also concerned with reforming the canonical life itself and was trying to force community rules even on men they called clerks, who were not monks but secular canons serving the cathedrals."

"My, mister, you be a scholar, I take it."

"Oh, no, just interested in old churches and in church history, you know. What a lovely old building this is!"

"Well, I likes chapel myself. Loud 'ymns and a good sermon and none of this general confession and all the prayers writ down 'til you gets fair sick of 'em."

"Do you people have to use this church, then?"

"No, us don't 'ave to except now and then, but it makes somewhere a bit different to go, and chapel means a long walk on a wet Sunday."

"You find it dull here?"

"Dull and dead. Glad I'll be to get shut of it, and the sooner the better, I can tell ee."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that." At this point Alison, who was now wandering round the church and studying the carved capitals of the pillars, came up to join him and the old woman just as the warden re-entered the church and took them out of it. It had only one entrance and this was on the south side, a heavily ornamented Norman doorway carved with four recessed rows of mouldings, chevron, billet, and roll and, on its outermost semi-circle, with triangular-shaped wedges having holes in them to represent eyes, a primitive form of duckbill decoration, effective and somewhat startling. Equally startling was the behaviour of the old woman, who spat at one of the duckbills as she passed it.

"Well," said the warden, as they left the church and the old woman, and strolled around what had been the cloister garth of the monastery, "can you hold out any hope, Mr. Herring? My nephew was certain you would do what you could to preserve us."

"All I can do is to get our architect to come down and take a look at your buildings, but I ought to tell you that I'm not inclined to advise you to raise any high hopes. You see, all that is worth preserving, from my society's point of view, the local council are already proposing to maintain," said Timothy. "Your Tudor additions can be matched and,

indeed, excelled, in lots of old almshouses. We may be able to insist that the council retain the hospital block, because it is built on the site of the monks' dorter and still has the night stair to the church, but, frankly, your cottages are hardly worth bothering about, architecturally speaking."

"Oh, dear! But what about my poor old ladies? I'm glad to have your opinion, but all the same, I think if you could see the horrid little almshouses in the town to which some of my pensioners are to be sent, you might reconsider your findings."

"The trouble is," said Alison, "that your old ladies are nothing to do with Phisbe's work, you see. I expect Mr. Coningsby has told you the sort of things Tim's committee can do, and that includes, of necessity, things they can't do. We're both terribly sorry about it, but it would be very wrong of us to raise your hopes. We simply don't see your almshouses as a Phisbe job."

"No, quite," said Miss Coningsby-Layton, dispiritedly. "I see what you mean."

"Everything now depends on the surveyor and Tom Parsons. All the same, I agree with my wife, as you know. I don't really think yours a Phisbe job," said Timothy. "I wish, for everybody's sake, that it were, and, of course, I shan't say anything to prejudice our architect. He'll be free to make his own decision before anything is said to the committee."

"Who prefer buildings to people, of course. But, Mr. Herring, what about these poor old women being uprooted, and perhaps separated, at their time of life? They'll never settle down happily anywhere else," protested the warden.

"It still isn't our pigeon," said Timothy gently. "I agree with you that it seems hateful to upset old people and destroy their peace and security, but the cobbler must stick to his last, and my job, and Phisbe's, is only to make sure that nothing of historical and architectural value is destroyed. As you say, we deal with brick, wood, and stone,

not with flesh and blood, unfortunately. I imagine the council have had this museum, park, and bathing-place on the agenda for some time, and that's why no repairs have been carried out. They just seem to be waiting until your almshouses collapse. It's a rotten way of doing things, but there it is."

They took their leave on this pessimistic note, and Alison was silent for the first thirty miles of the journey; then she said,

"What did you make of the warden? Is she thinking *only* of the effect on her old ladies—or am I being cynical in asking that?"

"I don't know. You're thinking of *our* Coningsby, I suppose, and that his interest may not be wholly Phisbean."

"Well, it's a bit more than coincidence, wouldn't you say, that he was the person who put the committee on to saving Lady Matilda's Rest? You see, from what Miss Coningsby-Layton indicated, I'm left wondering whether, if they move those old ladies into other almshouses, Miss Coningsby-Layton won't be out of a job."

"Yes, I know. What very unpleasant minds we must both have!"

"Oh, had you thought the same thing?"

"I'm afraid I had. I think it sticks out a mile. I mean, she's not exactly young, is she? Of course, she may have private means. I hope she has. Anyway, so far as Phisbe is concerned, I suppose the future welfare of Miss Coningsby-Layton is quite beside the point, and the fact that she's Coningsby's aunt wouldn't weigh with me either way if I thought those almshouses ought to be preserved. Incidentally, I wouldn't have minded a word with some of the other inmates. We've indulged in a bit of sob-stuff about the iniquity of splitting up these old ladies and wrecking their peace of mind by transferring them to other almshouses, but, so far as Mrs. Baines is concerned, she'll

be very sorry and disappointed if it doesn't come off. She doesn't have much to say in favour of Lady Matilda's Rest, and neither had the one I spoke to in the church."

"But do you think those two are necessarily typical of the inmates?"

"I couldn't say. You've lived in a community of women . . ."

"Yes, but I had plenty of money, apart from my salary, and P.-B. is very liberal-minded about time off for the staff, and, of course, for a third of every year we weren't in school at all. I don't think my life was comparable with that of a Mrs. Baines. All the same, I'll admit that tempers sometimes got a bit short and small personal differences of opinion sometimes got magnified out of all proportion to their real significance, especially towards the end of term. Why? What did Mrs. Baines have to say?"

"She hates Miss Melsom, with whom she's paired off to take her turn at cooking; she is convinced that compulsory baths have shortened her life; she declares that the hospital matron is a martinet (which doesn't surprise me; I think I'd be the same in matron's place, with a dozen obstinate, unreasonable old ladies to deal with); and she complains that the warden doles them out inferior tea and not enough of it. She knows where the grass is greener, and that's in a much bigger place in Danbury, where they run a self-service canteen presided over by paid staff and where the inmates have access to television and the radio and get a weekly session of Bingo run by some local women's club with shopping vouchers for prizes."

"Oh, dear! Yes, it does sound rather a far cry from Lady Matilda's Rest. It seems as though some of Miss Coningsby-Layton's old ladies might well be happier elsewhere. That dining-hall, for instance . . ."

"Yes, I know. Well, enough of all this, don't you think? How about a complete change of subject? You were talking the other day about Madeira and the Dalmatian coast.

Make your choice. From what Miss Coningsby-Layton was telling us, the council won't be making a move this year, and Phisbe won't do anything until the October committee meeting, so let's talk about holidays. I'm sorry I put you off them. There wasn't any need, after all. Speak your mind."

"Before that, I want to go to Herrings again. I've thought of all kinds of things we can do to it. Besides, there's the boat. When are we going to buy it? I think I'd rather spend the next month or two making plans than go abroad for a holiday."

"You can make plans while we're away. I'm not going to be done out of a place in the sun because of that wretched and ill-starred house I've been unfortunate enough to inherit. Anyway, I've bought a boat, but I don't want the house or any part of it until I've sent in an army of gardeners to clear up the courtyard and the grounds, and even then I'm not sure you'll really want to live there, although it might be only for part of the summer. Another thing: I also want to get a plumber in and an expert on drainage to supervise him, and perhaps by the time we get home from our holiday the place will strike me a bit more favourably. Won't that do?"

"Yes, of course, darling, but I don't want to wait all that time before you take me to look at it again. What's the matter with next week-end? We need not stay the night in the house if you don't want to. It would be rather nice to stay Friday night in Cambridge, visit Herrings on Saturday, go back to the same hotel, and come home on Sunday. What do you think about that?"

"Well, all right," said Timothy, "so long as we don't stay the night in the beastly place."

"I suppose you've been there again this week?"

"Oh, yes, I thought I'd better find out all the things which need attention, but the more I see of that house the less I like it. Sometimes I think the best thing would be to pull it down and build a country cottage on the site."

“Could we do that? It would solve a host of problems if we could.”

“Well, first I’ll get the surroundings cleared up, and then we’ll see.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

An End to Matilda's Rest

"Sunk is my sight; set is my Sun;
And all the loome of life undone:
The staffe, the Elme, the prop, the shelt'ring
wall
Whereon my Vine did crawle,
Now, now, blown downe; needs must the old
stock fall."

*An Ode to Master Endymion Porter, Upon His
Brother's Death.*

"Which I should wish to give in my notice, sir," said Mrs. Gee, "as from today."

"I'm sorry about that," said Timothy insincerely, "but you must admit that the house isn't really habitable at present and the courtyard and grounds are in a particularly sorry state. I *must* have something done about them, you know, however inconvenient it may be."

"With Jabez away, sir, I should not have a minute's peace of mind with workmen and gardeners and such all over the place."

"Oh, is Jabez away?"

"Which he is likely to be for some weeks, sir, and I should not wish to be left to cope on my own. Not with so many strange men about the place, sir."

"Oh, well, you must please yourself, of course, Mrs. Gee. Have you somewhere to go?"

"Which my married niece in Wapping will have me and welcome, she keeping a newspaper and tobacco shop and glad of some help in the place now her eldest have gone up north."

"Oh, that's all right, then. Well, look, no need to work out your notice, Mrs. Gee. Suppose I give you your month's money? Would you like to go at once?"

"Which it is very kind of you, sir, and I'll be glad to, there being a train from Horsebridge at four o'clock and my boxes packed and ready."

"Oh, good. I'll run you to the station."

"Which I should have liked to stay and oblige, sir, but could not bring myself, my horror being of strange men, sir, right from a young girl once took advantage of."

"Yes, I quite understand. Are your boxes downstairs? Oh, they are? All right, then, I'll stick them in the boot of the car and collect Mrs. Herring and we'll be off. Wouldn't Ipswich station be more convenient for you than Horsebridge, though? You could get a fast train direct to London from Ipswich."

"Which, in the ordinary way, I would be glad to do, sir, but I have an appointment in Horsebridge as I would be obliged to keep, it being with a friend of mine and today being Saturday, as is the end of the week, not to intrude upon giving you my notice, sir."

Timothy translated this involved statement.

"Oh, very well, then. It's all the same to me," he said. He loaded her two suitcases and a small trunk into the boot and on the back seat of the car and they drove the few miles to Horsebridge. The tower of Lady Matilda's Rest came into view.

"I did 'ear as they was thinkin' of pullin' that old place down," said Mrs. Gee, from her seat at the back where she was flanked by one of her suitcases and a shopping basket.

"Yes, I heard that, too," said Timothy. "I went to have a look at it the other day, but I was told that only the

cottages were to go. The tower and the rest of it will stay.”

“Them poor old dears! Whatever will become of ‘em? That’s the only ‘ome they knows.”

“Perhaps they’ll be the better for a change. We’ll hope so, anyway. Do you want to go straight to the station?”

“No, if you please, sir, which I wants to do a bit of shoppin’ first. It don’t do to go empty-‘anded to relations. It ain’t like friends, as is glad of your company and ‘as invited you to share their bread and board. Relations—mine, at any road—is always graspin’.”

“Right you are. You just tell me where to drop you, and I’ll pull up as near the spot as I can. I’m not allowed to stop just anywhere, as you know.” He wondered why the story about having to meet a friend had been changed, but he followed her directions and pulled up near the covered market. There were parking spaces, but no meters. The spaces had been designed for the convenience of shoppers and there was a waiting-time of half an hour only. Timothy was unable to pull away at once because a car in one of the parking spaces to his left backed out and took a few moments to turn. When they were on the road again and free of town traffic, Alison remarked,

“That woman whom Mrs. Gee met at the entrance to the market was the woman you were talking to in Lady Matilda’s church while you were looking at the font.”

“Oh, really?” said Timothy. “I suppose the inmates must get to know people outside. Almshouses aren’t prisons. I believe the old ladies often wander into the town.”

“It’s quite a long way from Lady Matilda’s Rest.”

“I suppose there’s a bus, and they get pocket-money from the council.”

“Yes, but their O.A.P. is mortgaged to pay for their keep, I suppose. How do you know about the pocket-money?”

"The disgruntled old soul whose knitting I coped with while I sat on her cottage seat gave me a résumé of the way the place is run."

"Funny Mrs. Gee should know one of them. I shouldn't have thought she was the type to make friends with the poor and needy."

"Oh, come, now! Don't judge so harshly. She's probably good-heartedness itself when you get to know her."

"I find I'm very glad she's gone, anyway, now that I know we're rid of her. If we have anybody in her place, I think we'll make sure it's a native of those parts."

"What prejudice do you have against Londoners?"

"None at all. I like, admire, and respect them. But that's in general. It doesn't always apply in particular cases, and Mrs. Gee *is* a particular case. I suppose we ought to have asked her whether she knows of any local people who might be glad to act as caretakers when we're not at Herrings, though, oughtn't we?"

"If you feel as you do about her, I shouldn't think you'd care about her recommendations."

"No, perhaps not."

"Still, you're probably right about Herrings (note that I haven't called it Warlock Hall this time) needing a caretaker when we're not there. Mrs. Gee did at least keep it clean and aired."

"You got rid of her more easily than you expected, though, didn't you?" asked Alison, as they continued their drive towards the Cambridge hotel where they were to spend a second night.

"Yes, thank goodness. She gave me notice, and I suggested she might like to leave at once. She was going to, anyway, even if we hadn't come along today. Her luggage was dumped under the gatehouse archway and I think she was wearing her best bib and tucker for the journey."

"It's a bit odd, isn't it, that she wanted to be off at such short notice?"

"Apparently she can't abide strange men about the place. She was 'once took advantage of' as a young girl, she informed me. As we're bringing in a small army of workmen and gardeners, I should have thought there was safety in numbers, but that theory doesn't seem to have occurred to her. However, thank goodness she and Jabez have left the place. I'm as glad to see the back of them as you are."

"But why? She kept the house clean, as we agreed, and you thought she seemed a harmless sort of person enough, and Jabez could have helped in the garden."

"Yes, well, it's really Jabez I'm talking about. I have an idea he's a wrong 'un, or else he's in with some wrong 'uns."

"What makes you think that?"

Timothy gave her a carefully edited account of his adventures, including those when last he had visited Warlock Hall, and concluded,

"So either he's a villain or a dupe, or maybe a bit of both. Anyway, there's been something fishy going on at the Hall and down-river of a night."

"Why haven't you told me all this before?"

"There was no occasion until today and, once we get our workmen in, there won't be any more trouble of that sort, I'm sure."

"What do you think it was all about?"

"Smuggling, but what the three of them were planning to smuggle I couldn't say. Of course, it asks for it out here. The house is solitary and the creek is handy. I've no doubt there could be hiding-places in the marshes, but I expect that, after my great-uncle died, the house was more convenient."

"For what? Have you any idea?"

"Well, there were those palliasses in the undercroft. They'd gone, the last time I was there, but when we go back to the house I'd like to find out whether they've been replaced. I'm glad Mrs. Gee is out of the way because it somehow gives me a free hand to do the necessary snooping."

"But the house belongs to you. Why shouldn't you snoop?"

"Belongs to *us*. I know, but it's better to have it and the gatehouse to ourselves, I think. You see, there's something else I ought to tell you. Do you remember saying, after we'd slept at the Hall, that you felt sure somebody had come into our bedroom during the night?"

"But nobody had, had they?"

"I'm afraid somebody did manage to sneak in. He left a box of matches on the bedside table."

"But why should . . . ? I mean, it seems such a pointless thing to do."

"Not if, after Mrs. Gee's insistence that the Hall is haunted, she or Jabez or somebody else wanted to scare us away."

"But a box of matches wouldn't do that!"

"I'm not so sure. It gave me a bit of a turn to find it there. I was afraid you'd feel the same, so I sneaked it under my pillow before you saw it."

"You must have picked up the gas stove matches and put them on the bedside table and forgotten you'd brought them upstairs."

"All right, then, perhaps I did."

"Don't try to pacify the child! You mean you *know* you didn't?"

"That's right. I mean I know I didn't. If you remember, I had to use my lighter for the candles. There weren't any matches in the house and I never carry them, so what?"

"Oh, Tim! And we'd locked the bedroom door! It does seem rather frightening. And indeed there weren't any

other matches. I remember now. I used the last two out of the tiny packet in my handbag to light the calor gas stove."

"It means there must be another staircase, and one which leads directly into that room. I must make sure I find it and block it up, that's all."

"But weren't the front and back doors locked and bolted? How could anything human get into the house through those?"

"Through my great-uncle's air-raid shelter. I'll show you sometime. Besides, the windows in those downstairs rooms where my great-uncle dined and slept could be opened easily enough from outside. You'd only need a good strong kitchen knife to force the catches. But that's not my worry. I can easily get them burglar-proofed and I can get the air-raid shelter blocked off."

"Have you thought any more about pulling down and re-building?"

"Sorry, but I don't like the place. I don't like the setting and I don't like those plug-uglies—not that I think they'll come back, once the house begins to be set to rights. There'll be too many people around. All the same, I'd love to know the whole of that story. My theory, for what it's worth, is that somebody, with the help of Jabez and his friends, is smuggling in illegal immigrants and, while I'm desperately sorry for the poor blighters, I'm certainly not prepared to have them parked on my premises until they can get a forged work-permit or whatever it is they need."

"Meanwhile, what are our immediate plans?—apart from Herrings, I mean."

"Well, I want to take Tom Parsons along to have a look at Lady Matilda's Rest. If he thinks well of the almshouses and the hospital, I'll get in touch with the local council and see what they have to say about preserving the buildings intact. Of course, even if they agree, it may still mean they have to re-house the old ladies."

"All this is going to take time. Must you put it in hand at once?"

"You're thinking about the Dalmatian coast and Madeira. Well, look, I don't suppose there's any desperate hurry about the almshouses. Tom can look them over and then, if he wants them to be a Phisbe job, although I don't think they are, the committee will need to get an objection lodged against the demolition, and then I'll get the work begun on Warlock Hall, and *then* we'll have our holiday. We shall only be away a month or so—maybe two months, if we feel like it . . ."

"No, not longer than a month."

"Eh?"

"Tim, I've got something to tell you. Well, no, not really to tell you—that's too sweeping—something I need your advice about."

"Darling, don't try to pull that one! What you mean is that you've committed yourself to some damn thing in some way you're not too sure about, and you want me either to say that I approve or else to suggest some means by which you can extricate yourself without loss of face or your self-respect. Come clean, now!"

"Oh, Tim, I didn't mean to do anything behind your back, and I can honestly say that I haven't absolutely committed myself, but I do need your advice. Well, not so much your advice as your consent."

"*What! My consent?* In these days of woman's ascendancy over mere man?"

"Yes, even in these days of equal partnership because, if I do what I'm going to tell you about, it will affect you for about ten weeks, so it's only fair to give you a casting vote."

"Ten weeks? Sounds like a school term."

"Well, actually, darling, that's exactly what it is."

"Sabrina has suborned you! I knew she would. This rotten *Macbeth* thing was the writing on the wall! I should

have known better than to relinquish you to her clutches!”

“Darling, she *is* in a bit of a spot, and it will only be for one term. She wants somebody to take over the English department while Hildegard has a sabbatical. She could manage all right if it weren’t for this prep. school thing she’s planning, because she could do a bit of the English herself, although she hates classroom work, I know. But to start this prep. school off on the right foot, she can’t tie herself up with giving lessons, so would you mind very much if I helped out?”

“It would involve your living at the school, I suppose?” said Timothy gloomily.

“Well, yes. I could hardly commute every day from Stroud, could I? I could spend every week-end with you at home, of course. She would arrange for me to be free from noon on Fridays until prep. on Monday evenings, and then there would be the long week-end at half-term—Thursday afternoon until Tuesday evening . . .”

“Give me time to think it over,” said Timothy, who was busy making his own plans. “When do you have to let her know?”

“Well, I’ve accepted the job provisionally. I’ve only to let her know if you object so strongly that I feel I must turn it down.” She glanced at his profile, but it told her nothing. She lapsed into the silence she usually preserved on long journeys and nothing more was said until they stopped for dinner. Then she said, “Do you have any strong feeling against it? Do say, if you have.”

“How do you feel about it yourself? Have *you* strong feelings either way?”

“I’d like to help her out. She was good to me, you know, while I was on the staff. Besides, you could have a lot of fun without me, couldn’t you?”

“Perish the thought!” said Timothy, with what he hoped was conviction.

“Oh, Tim, don’t be such a liar! For one thing, you and Tom are going to sort out Lady Matilda’s Rest, and then you know you’ll be in your element over at Herrings, bossing the workmen and the gardeners and chasing the ghost and outwitting the smugglers, if any. I should only have been in your way and cramped your style, so that settles that. You’ll have the time of your life without me, and it will be lovely for you to be able to tell me all about it at the week-ends. I shall look forward tremendously to them.”

Whether Alison was being ironic, bitter, or (as appeared on the surface) co-operative and cheerful, Timothy did not know and did not enquire. He busied himself with ringing up his travel agent and, finding that it would be easier, at such short notice, to arrange for a holiday in Madeira rather than a cruise down the coast of Yugoslavia, booked the former. He and Alison were to go and come back by sea, spending three weeks at Funchal and returning home three days before the school term began.

This being settled, he rang up Tom Parsons and arranged to meet him in Horsebridge and take him to see Lady Matilda’s Rest before he and Alison were due to sail. They lunched together in the town, Tom having set out very early from his home in Shrewsbury, and decided to leave their cars in Horsebridge and walk alongside the river to the almshouses.

“Who owns all this land?” asked Tom. There was a path beside the river, or, rather, between the river and a broad, shallow stream which skirted the long gardens of houses on the outskirts of the town. It then formed the boundary of small-holdings until, having meandered on in loops beside gravelled shallows, it met the main river beyond Lady Matilda’s Rest and, having joined with it, contributed its waters to the creek not far from Warlock Hall.

"I've no idea. I suppose it's council property, as they intend to turn it into a public park," replied Timothy. "I've had some correspondence with the town clerk, and apparently they propose to begin the demolition of the almshouses in October and then carry out what he calls 'the work on the amenities' in the spring."

"So, if the place is worth saving, we've got to work fast. Do you know whether the county council approves? After all, Horsebridge isn't a county borough, so the county council will be the local planning authority. They're bound to notify various bodies, of whom Phisbe is one, before they can pull down anything likely to be of architectural or historic interest."

"So far as I know, Phisbe has received no application or notification, as I pointed out to the town clerk. He replied that we *have* been notified and that, as he'd received no reply, he'd taken it that silence indicated consent. To my next query, which was whether the other bodies concerned had consented, I have received no answer, so I've told him to hold his horses until I've made the necessary enquiries, pointing out that, while an investigation is still pending, it is illegal for his council to make a move in the matter."

"Oh, well, that should hold him for a bit. Mind you, as a lawyer he'll be aware of all this, and I expect you'll find he *has* notified all the proper people, and that, for some reason, the application to Phisbe has gone astray. Still, we'll take a look at the place and see what we think."

"The trouble, in a way, you know, is young Coningsby."

"Oh? How do you mean?"

"Well, this bird—the town clerk—sent me a copy of the letter he says he sent to our headquarters, and correspondence at headquarters is all dealt with first and foremost by Coningsby before anything is sent on to me."

"You don't suspect the incorruptible Coningsby of jiggery-pokery with the correspondence, I hope?"

"No, of course not, only—well, the warden of Lady Matilda's Rest happens to be his aunt, or, at any rate, some relation of his and, if the almshouses go down the drain, so, in a manner of speaking, does the warden. Alison and I have both realised that."

"Oh, dear! Yes, I see what you mean, but—Coningsby?"

"I know it seems an unworthy suspicion and I hope to heaven I'm wrong. Oh, well, if you condemn the place, that will be the end of it so far as Phisbe is concerned, but I shall find out, all the same, what the other conservation and preservation bodies think of it."

"You can take it for granted they've agreed to the demolition. The council wouldn't dare to go ahead if they haven't."

"I'm not so sure about that, if they've got official planning permission from the county, you know. It's not as though it's just a case of destruction. They really are proposing to provide some amenities. Sports grounds, a running-track, an open-air swimming bath, and boating facilities are definitely desirable public works, so who's going to worry about a dozen old women and an out-of-work warden? I've pointed that out to Miss Coningsby-Layton, of course. I had to."

"By the way, Tim, who holds the fishing rights over these waters?"

"Oh, they rest with the council, too, I suppose. It's only coarse fishing, anyway. It's not as though it's a trout stream. I expect for about ten pence a day anybody can fish here."

"Is that the warden's tower?" asked Parsons, pointing, and breaking away from the subject immediately under discussion. "Quite an impressive landmark, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's only about a mile from the town to Lady Matilda's Rest, if you come this way." They took a path which led to a plank bridge over the lesser stream, surmounted a stile a little farther on, and found themselves

approaching the great gates of the almshouses. Between the flower-beds which bordered the broad drive up to the gatehouse they met an old woman. She raised her walking-stick and pointed it, witch-like, at Timothy.

"So you be here again," she said.

"Yes, turned up again like a bad penny," said Timothy. "Good afternoon, Mrs. . . ."

"Simkins. I see you a-talkin' to Mrs. Baines. A-settin' on her outside bench were you, and a-talkin' to her."

"Yes, I believe I was."

"They're a-goin' to pull our houses about our ears. Is that any of your doing?"

"Certainly not, Mrs. Simkins. In fact, I've brought my friend Mr. Parsons to have a look round and see whether anything can be done about it. Mr. Parsons is an architect."

"We had the surveyor. *He* said as how we got to come down."

"Did he, indeed? When was this?"

"A-pokin' and a-pryin'! Why for can't they leave us alone? Why do we have to come down?" She lowered the walking-stick and hobbled on, muttering to herself.

"Poor old creature," said Parsons. "Makes you wish you *could* do something. It's a rotten business to uproot them at their time of life, but I suppose bureaucracy doesn't worry too much about that."

"I understand they're to be re-housed," said Timothy, "but what that means I haven't the least idea. One thing, the other old dears I've spoken to don't much like it here, so *they* won't be too much upset when they have to leave."

"All the same, better the devil you know than the devil you don't. The council may even think some of these old women would be better off in the geriatric ward of the local hospital, you know."

"The warden certainly didn't seem keen on some of the accommodation they've been offered."

When they reached the gatehouse with its enormous porch, Timothy banged on the porter's shuttered window. Obtaining no response, he turned towards the door of the warden's tower, but before he could knock she had opened it.

"I believe you were expecting us," said Timothy. "This is Mr. Parsons, our architect. I promised you I'd bring him to take a look at the buildings."

"Oh, of course. I expect Mr. Parsons would prefer to wander around on his own. Without me, I mean."

"Well, if you really don't mind," said Parsons, "I'll just let Herring take me along. He's seen the buildings already, and I'd like to talk to him about them."

"So that's Coningsby's aunt," he added, as they walked out to what had been the cloister garth. The afternoon was sunny and quite warm. Several of the old women were seated outside on their benches in pairs or singly, and one was snipping dead roses off the bushes which bordered their side of the grass plot. She straightened up when the two men approached.

"Be you council?" she enquired, making a threatening gesture with her scateurs.

"No, no," Timothy hastened to assure her, "anything but. We've just come to have a look round."

"So be as you ain't council," she said, resuming her task. Parsons approached two who were seated side by side on one of the benches.

"I wonder whether you'd be kind enough to show me over your houses?" he said. Both rose, and the one who appeared to be the younger, although she looked as though she were well into her seventies, replied,

"This way, sir, but you mustn't take no account of the washing." Leaving her companion, she led the way to the first cottage in the row. "And 'appy I shall be when we're all condemned, sir," she somewhat startlingly remarked.

“Oh . . . you mean if the council pull these houses down?” asked Parsons, surprise in his voice.

“My married niece has always said she’d have me, sir, if ever I was turned out of here for any reason except my own disgrace. Got a nice little house in Ipswich, she have, and room for me now the family’s old enough to get married, with nobody but youngest daughter livin’ with ‘em.”

Parsons inspected every second cottage and then suggested that he and Timothy should go round to the back and take a look at the whole row from the water-meadows.

“Well?” asked Timothy, when they had done this and had also been over the hospital wing. “What’s the verdict?”

“Well,” Parsons replied, “if the whole place was under sentence of demolition in order to let some builder or the council put up a housing estate, of course I’d oppose it root and branch, but, as you know, the council are prepared to save and renovate the parts which matter. If they’d preserved the monks’ dorter in its original form, I’d try to save the hospital, too, but the mediæval building has gone, except for the night stair to the church, and the present lath and plaster construction isn’t really worth preserving. As for the almshouses, well, even to keep them standing, there are all kinds of structural repairs which ought to be done, and done soon. They make quite a picturesque row, both back and front, but nothing, of course, compared with, for instance, the almshouses at Chipping Norton, still less with those at Chipping Campden or the St. Cross dwellings near Winchester, which are older than these.”

“The Cotswolds have the advantage of stone for building, of course,” said Timothy, “and that, to my mind, makes a heap of difference. So it’s thumbs down for Lady Matilda’s Rest.”

“Not necessarily, but if the other preservation and conservation societies don’t oppose the demolition, I don’t think Phisbe needs to stick its neck out.”

“Well, we’d better go and break the news to Miss Coningsby-Layton, I suppose. I’ve prepared her, but she’s not exactly going to dance and sing. Is it any good to get the cottages surveyed?”

“You’d only get a repetition of what I’ve told you. There’s a lot to be done over the next two or three years to keep them habitable, and I can’t see the council spending the money even if they wanted to—which they don’t. What’s happening to the church, I wonder? I know it’s going to be preserved, but how are they going to use it?”

“When we were here last time I asked about that. Miss Coningsby-Layton said that it has been declared redundant under the 1969 Pastoral Measure and under the Redundant Churches and Other Religious Buildings Act of the same year. The council have been given planning permission to turn it into a concert hall, provided that the items on the programme are of a solemn nature.”

“Bach, but not The Bachelors?”

“Yes, and Humperdinck the First, but not the Second, and Beethoven but not the Beatles, and Franck (César) but not Frank (Sinatra). That’s about the size of it.”

“So that settles the happy fate of the church, because, if it’s to be used as a concert hall, it will have to be kept in repair. So now to break the news to the warden. After all, it isn’t completely gloomy.”

“It is, for her, if the council won’t repair those dwellings.”

“Well, that’s as may be, and I’m sorry about it. Incidentally, the council’s surveyor will have reported on the state of those chimneys. They’ve been shored up fairly recently. I bet it broke their hearts to spend the money if the cottages are coming down so soon.”

“It wouldn’t look too good if a chimney fell on some old person’s head. Well, let’s get it over with the warden.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Death of an Elderly Woman

“When after many Lusters thou shalt be
Wrapt up in Seare-cloth with thine Ancestrie:
When of thy ragg’d Escutcheons shall be
seene
So little left, as if they ne’r had been . . .”

To His Worthy Friend, Mr. Arthur Bartly.

“Tim,” said Alison, when, some days later, he had taken her back to Warlock Hall and she had seen the gardeners at work and had made plans for turning the huge pond into a swimming pool, “why should we go abroad for our summer holiday?”

“I thought you were all set on it.”

“That was before I knew about the boat. When we’ve explored this river and the creek, we could try the Broads, or even part of the south coast. Why not?”

“I’d like that. Of course, we’ll be dependent on the weather, you know, and you might also get most fearfully bored.”

“Oh, no, I shouldn’t. Besides, I think we ought to keep in touch here while the men are at work. There might be all kinds of problems and it would be a great advantage if we could tackle them on the spot, or, at any rate, while we were in England.”

“Say no more. Operation Cruiser is on. I’ll get our president to help me take the boat round the coast. I’m not

having you on board while we do that, if you don't mind. No, please don't argue about it. You can meet us at Chichester with the car, and I'll take you aboard at Bosham."

"I'm a better swimmer than you are."

"Better, but perhaps not stronger. Anyway, do as you're told or we don't go. Right?"

"No, *not* right. Either I go with you all the way, or I don't go at all."

"Dear, dear! Well, we'll see what the president says. Perhaps he can't come, and in that case it's all off."

"Why? It isn't the first time you've handled a boat, is it?"

"No, but it's better with two of us."

"Exactly. You and me."

"I meant, better with two men."

"Oh, Tim! It's not as though there's any heavy work to be done! I can read a chart and we shall only hug the coast, I suppose, and I don't get sea-sick, and I'll promise to obey orders in a general sort of way."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"I'll obey orders except in cases where I know better than you what ought to be done."

"And you expect me to take you on those terms?"

"Yes, of course. Besides, if the president comes, you'll have to take orders, anyway. He's certain to want to be skipper."

"There's a snag, though. I've gone and committed us to this trip to Madeira. What can I do about that?"

"Cancel. They always have a waiting list. If not, pay what they ask, but I'm sure they won't bother. And now, darling, when do we start? And, Tim, don't ask the president. It will be ever so much more fun on our own. And I don't suppose I'll often know better than you. I'll try not to, anyway. One thing I've learnt is that masculine dignity

must be served. It's a nuisance, but there it is, and there's not very much I can do about it, worse luck!"

"I don't know so much! I'd hate to be a balloon if you were around with a pin!"

They transported the cruiser overland to Bosham, after all, voyaged only by day, and snugged down every night, although each afternoon they had to begin looking for moorings earlier than they would have liked, for it was full holiday season and the anchorages were crowded. First they explored the whole of Chichester harbour and the various channels coming down from the Hard at Bosham, where the cruiser was launched. They turned at Dead End past the ferry and the Hard, rounded Longmore Point past the yacht basin and its lock, and turned the cruiser in the Fishbourne Channel to pass Dell Quay and so landed at Fishbourne.

They dined and spent the night in Chichester, visited the cathedral, lunched, then cruised up the Thorney Channel along the coast of Thorney Island, found it rather uninteresting, so went up to Emsworth along the channel of the same name. There was low-water landing at the Hard, so they went ashore on Thorney Island and found a lane which took them into Emsworth, where they stayed the night. In this desultory fashion they spent three weeks, visiting the beautiful Beaulieu River and Lymington, but avoiding entering Christchurch Harbour because of its shifting bar and varying depths, its onshore winds and heavy swells. However, inexperienced though they were, they found an anchorage beyond the Haven House, a prominent landmark on the north side of the river, and decided to stay there for the afternoon and night.

It was while they were having their snack lunch in the cockpit that a powerful motor-cruiser went by. Timothy, who had his binoculars out because he had been studying the tower of Christchurch Priory, turned them, from force of habit, on to the moving boat.

“That looked like Jabez Gee,” he said. “Surprising to find him in these waters. Wonder what he’s up to?”

“Why should he be up to anything?” asked Alison. “He works with boats. He told us so.”

“I know. You have a look.” He handed her the glasses.

“Well, now, there’s a coincidence,” said Alison, as she returned them. “It’s Jabez all right, although I’ve only seen him once. I don’t know the tall, thin one who’s standing up at the wheel, but the third man is our renegade Macbeth, Kilbride Colquhoun as ever is.”

“Are you sure?” Timothy took back the binoculars and trained them on the now exciting craft.

“Dead certain, darling. I saw more than enough of him during the early rehearsals, before he walked out on us, so I can’t help recognising him now I see him again. Why, what is exciting you so much?”

“Oh, nothing—only—well, he happens to be the second of my conspirators at Warlock Hall and the tall, thin helmsman is the third of them. Something is falling into place.”

“How do you mean?”

“Those fellows—Ross and Banquo—were talking about Colquhoun and one of them was saying that Macbeth had scratched from the play because he got into a pub brawl and had his face knocked about . . .”

“Oh? You mean it wasn’t at a pub brawl, it was that night when he collided head on with the thin man at Herrings.”

“That’s it. Now all I’ve got to do is find out the name of the thin chap, and if they trespass on my property again I’ll sue them, especially as Jabez now has no right to enter the Hall.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t think they’d go back there now we’ve got workmen all over the place. If they really are smuggling in illegal immigrants, they’ve changed the scene of operations, I expect, and are using the south coast

channels instead of our creek. Anyway, we don't really know that they're smugglers at all, do we?"

"Not with all those palliasses I saw laid down in the undercroft and elsewhere? My word. I'd like to know the truth about them!"

"I suppose," said Alison, after a pause, "that, if I weren't with you, you'd go after them. I mean, if you had another man with you. Well, please don't let me stand in your way. I mean, I'd hate you not to do something you wanted to do, just because I wouldn't be much good in a fight. I'd be quite handy with a boathook, though, if it came to it."

Timothy laughed.

"I know you would," he said, "but the shot isn't on the board. What they get up to is no business of mine, so long as they're not carrying on their activities in a house which belongs to me. I wouldn't mind following them up just for the fun of it, and we shouldn't run into trouble unless I started it (which I'm not prepared to do at present). You could greet Colquhoun as an old acquaintance and we both know Gee, and I could bear to find out the other chap's name. It might come in useful later on."

"I don't think we'd catch up with them, you know. That was a pretty big boat and I'd say a lot faster than we are. She's almost out of sight already."

"Well, as you rightly point out, of their nefarious enterprises actual proof, so far, is lacking, and I'm not a policeman or an exciseman, anyway. On with the dance; let joy be unconfined. It *is* odd about your Macbeth being my Plummy-Voice, though. Where would you like to spend the night?"

They avoided Poole Harbour, hugged the coast past Anvil Cove and decided to go no further west than Weymouth, where they moored just about a mile inside the entrance to the harbour. A few days later they returned to Chichester and, having cruised up the river as far as

Arundel, they parted from their boat and returned to Chichester itself, where their car was to pick them up after the cruiser had been sent on its slower road-journey back to the creek. It was in Chichester that they saw Jabez again. This time he was without his companions. They met him as he was coming out of a public house in East Street, when they were returning to their hotel after visiting the thirteenth-century almshouses off Lion Street.

"I wonder whether it's a place like that where some of Miss Coningsby-Layton's old ladies are to go?" Alison was saying, and Timothy was about to reply when he stopped short.

"Why, good morning, Gee," he said, with feigned heartiness. "You seem to get about a good deal these days."

"Same to you, sir. Good morning, madam. 'Avin' your 'oliday, I take it?"

"Yes. And you?"

"Not me, no. Follerin' me trade, as you might say."

"Ah, yes. Didn't you pass us somewhere about Mudeford, near Christchurch, the other day?" asked Timothy.

"Not me, guv, no. Brought a gent's yacht round from Lowestoft, that's all. Ain't been no further west nor Itchenor."

"Oh, really? It's easy to be mistaken. Where are you living now?"

"In Lowestoft, like I said."

"Not with your mother, then?"

"Oh, no. The old lady's gone to 'elp keep shop in London. That's no place for me. Got to foller the boats, I 'ave, and they don't keep my sort of boats up along *them* parts, I don't reckon."

"Now why should he lie about Christchurch?" said Timothy, when they had gone on their way. "Because we *did* see him, both of us, and although I wouldn't swear in

court to those other fellows, I'm perfectly certain they're the chaps who were with him at Warlock Hall that night."

"Of course, their errand in these southern waters could be innocent enough. You'd run an awful risk trying to bring illicit cargo into any of the harbours or rivers down here," said Alison. "Perhaps they had been over to the Continent to contact their friends . . ."

"And warn them against shipping any more cargoes to the creek? I'd believe that if I thought they knew I'd rumbled them that night, but I don't think for a minute that they *do* know. Anyway, it's just one more thing to pigeonhole. And you're wrong about these south coast harbours. They've been used quite a lot for smuggling in illegal immigrants. Apart from what has been in the newspapers, you've only to look at the charts. See here, now, I'll show you what I mean when we get back, but, to be going on with, you've only got to think of Chichester Harbour itself, with Langston Harbour next door to it and connected with it by Sweare Deep. There are plenty of well-marked channels where you can run motor-cruisers and yachts. There's the Chichester Channel itself, and Thorney Channel, with a perfectly good minor road at West Thorney up to Havant; there's the Emsworth Channel and the one which goes up to Bosham; then on the Langston side there's a way up to Bedhampton and, if you like to take a chance with an illicit cargo on board, I suppose you could risk the Broom Channel and the "cut" westward under the bridges to Horsea Island and Portchester."

"Very well. You've made your point, although I'm not sure that everything you suggest would be practicable, even for desperate men who wanted money, but I'll give you best."

"Thank you, darling. Well, our little, rather slow holiday is over and the chaps who are taking our cruiser back to the creek know exactly what to do, so—just one more night away from home, and then for the Cotswolds and a

warmed-up, indoor swimming pool! The bathing on this trip has been lousy.”

The usual shoal of letters, holiday postcards, begging letters, and postal advertisements was awaiting their arrival, for nothing had been sent on, since Timothy had been unable to leave any fixed address during the three weeks he and Alison had been away.

“Oh, dear!” she said. “Do you think it will all wait until tomorrow?”

“Better sort it, I suppose,” said Timothy, “but it will do after dinner. Well, now it’s over, what did you think of the holiday? Are you sorry we didn’t go to Madeira?”

“I’m not sure. I think I’m rather glad we didn’t have to *live* on the boat.”

“Yes, cribbed, cabined, and confined would have been *le mot juste*, in that case.”

“Would you rather have gone with another man and roughed it, instead of always dining and mostly sleeping ashore? Was I hopelessly in the way?”

“Now what sort of answer do you expect to a question like that?”

“I won’t press for one. It might be injudicious. By the way, I expect one of those envelopes contains my timetable and list of duties for next term.”

“Then we’ll do as you suggest, and attend to all the correspondence tomorrow. Tonight we will dedicate to the gods, first to Bacchus, then to Eros.”

“They must both be getting rather tired of us, don’t you think?”

“‘Or think you heaven is deaf, or hath no eyes?

Or those it hath, smile at your perjuries?’” retorted Timothy. “And now, shall we, or shall we not, put on formal raiment before we dine?”

“Oh, heavens, yes! It seems years and years since I saw you in a dinner jacket. And after dinner we *will* go through our letters. There might be something important. You never know.”

There was one letter in particular which had its own interest. It was from young Coningsby. He apologised for troubling Mr. Herring, but a very sad thing had happened at Lady Matilda’s Rest. One of the old ladies, a Mrs. Dasti, had been killed by a falling chimney and the police had been informed. Miss Coningsby-Layton was worried and upset. The police were not satisfied. There had been an inquest—perhaps Mr. Herring had seen a report in the newspapers—and it had been adjourned pending further enquiries. Under the circumstances, did Mr. Herring think that Coningsby could apply to the committee for three days’ leave of absence? He knew that family matters should not be allowed to impinge upon his work, but his aunt was in a great state of confusion and distress . . .

“The letter is dated the 24th,” said Timothy. “Poor old Coningsby. He must be wondering why the hell I haven’t either written or ‘phoned. I know the address of his lodgings. I’ll ring him at once, and tell him to go ahead with lending his aunt the benefit and support of his presence. As soon as you go to the school I’ll get along to headquarters and deal with the back-log of the Phisbe correspondence for him. It will keep until then. Wonder what the police don’t like about the old lady’s death? And why should a chimney pot fall? I thought we were told they’d all been shored up.”

“Failing an answer from you, Mr. Coningsby has probably written to the president,” said Alison. They continued to leaf through the pile of envelopes. “Yes, here’s an envelope in his writing,” she went on. Timothy read the letter.

“It’s all right,” he said. “He’s given Coningsby carte blanche and he supposes I’ll be glad of a job when you go to school, so *that’s* all right. The post office has been

notified to redirect all the Phisbe correspondence to this address. How thoughtful of the president!—I don't think!"

"Well, you'd rather deal with it here than stay at your club or an hotel, or keep making trips up to Town," said Alison sensibly, "and I shall be relieved to know that you've something useful to occupy your mind while I'm away."

"You know," said Timothy, disregarding this insult, "I rather think I'd like a word with Miss Coningsby-Layton myself to find what all this is about. Why shouldn't the police be satisfied? Surely they don't think another of the inmates got hold of a chimney-stack and crowned Mrs. Dasti with it! Peculiar name. Wonder what her nationality is? She seems to have an Indian flavour about her, but I don't remember seeing anybody there who looked other than basically English."

"Indian . . ." said Alison thoughtfully. Timothy glanced at her sharply.

"Rings a bell, you think?" he asked.

"Oh, no, not really. I mean, it couldn't be more than coincidence. What would an elderly woman in an almshouse have to do with smuggling in illegal immigrants? It isn't as though she could put them up in her tiny cottage, or give the smugglers an all-clear signal, or what else do—what's the word—contacts get up to?"

"Heaven knows. All I know is that the penalties are pretty severe if you're caught. One bloke got seven years just recently, and his assistants four years each."

"Well, you go along and see what it's all about. I expect you'd rather go on your own, wouldn't you? You won't want me cramping your style. Oh, but, look, Tim, I don't want to be separated from you, even for a couple of days, before I have to go off to the school. Why shouldn't you leave me at Herrings? Then, when you've spoken to Miss Coningsby-Layton, you could come back to the Hall for the night."

"I don't want to sleep at the beastly place, and I'm certainly not going to leave you there, even during the

day.”

“That’s silly. There’s an army of gardeners and workmen, and you could be back before they go home at the end of the day. Oh, Tim, I’m dying to see that countryside again. Look, if you don’t want to leave me there alone—ridiculous though that is, and not a bit complimentary, either—let’s see whether Diana Parsons will come. How would that be? Tom’s seen the almshouses, and maybe he’s just as keen as you to find out why the inquest has been adjourned, and all the rest of it. Ring them up, and see what Tom has to say. I don’t see why we should be frightened off your property by that insolent windbag of a Kilbride Colquhoun and that nasty Jabez Gee, or anybody else, and that includes the ghost.”

“Well, all right, but if Tom and Diana can’t make it, we don’t go—at least, you don’t. Understood?”

“I suppose so. Why don’t you give my clothes to the poor and put me in rompers and buy me a teddy bear?”

“Because I can’t afford it. Don’t be so up-stage and naughty. Anyway, all right. I’ll ring up Tom directly after dinner.”

He found Tom Parsons eager to talk.

“I’d have rung you if I’d known you were back,” said Tom. “Look, Tim, there *is* something fishy about that so-called accident. I don’t wonder the police are cagey. You remember that I had a look at those almshouses? Well, granted that sooner or later they’d have to come down or else have a big reconstruction job done on them, they weren’t in an immediately dangerous condition, and that I’ll swear.”

“The chimneys looked a bit pie-eyed, I thought.”

“I know, but they’d been strengthened. They weren’t in a condition so dangerous that they would topple. I put it up to the local council and they referred me to their surveyor. He’s a reputable man and the last chap to claim that a building was safe if it wasn’t. It wouldn’t do the council the

least bit of good to employ a yes-man, you know. Besides, the fellow is a freelance in his own right. I mean he doesn't need to keep in with the local authority in order to make a living. He's a properly chartered auctioneer and surveyor with a big practice, and if he says those chimneys were safe enough I'm prepared to believe him *au pied de la lettre*. The roofs (and that, of course, includes the chimney-stacks) were inspected six months ago because the warden thought they looked a bit askew, and anything which needed attention was shored up. It was the lath and plaster which didn't seem to me to be worth preserving. The roofs, and all that appertained thereto, were safe enough."

"High winds?"

"There haven't been any."

"A careless chimney sweep."

"Oh, I know all the possibilities. Now you're home, what about going down there and having another yarn with the warden? I've heard from Coningsby. I suppose you have, too. His aunt is all upset about what's happened, and who can blame her?"

"What about meeting me with Diana and Alison? There's a very decent hotel in Cambridge where we could spend the night."

"Hang on a minute while I canvass Diana's views . . . She says why can't we spend the night at Warlock Hall? She's heard it's haunted and, after my description, she can't wait to look it over."

"Well, Alison wants to see it again, too, so . . ." The arrangements were made. Tom and Diana were to come down from Shrewsbury, spend a night at Timothy's Cotswold home, and then the two couples, in Timothy's car, would go to Warlock Hall and while the men visited the almshouses their wives would plan curtains and interior decorations as though Timothy's suggestion of either selling or demolishing the mansion and building a country cottage in its stead had never been made.

“Yes, my old ladies have been dispersed,” said Miss Coningsby-Layton, “and I am to leave just as soon as the resumed inquest is over. The council have been subjected to some very adverse criticism, but, really, Mr. Herring, I think it is undeserved. The cottages were very thoroughly surveyed only six months ago, when the scheme for their demolition was first put out. The survey was Lady Princeps’s idea. She and one or two others were against demolition and made themselves very vociferous on the subject and I believe it was their insistence which led to the survey being made. The chimneys were all shored up as a result and, although it was agreed that it was only a temporary measure, they were considered to be safe enough. I cannot understand why one of them should fall, still less why it should fall in the way it did, and neither can the police. Of course, they ask all the questions but they do not tell anything, so I have no idea what they think or what they have to go on in thinking it.”

“I can understand why they’re not satisfied,” said Parsons. “What exactly happened? Except that a chimney fell and killed someone, I don’t know anything much about it, and Herring hasn’t even read the accounts in the newspapers—not that they’ve given it much space. He’s been holiday-making in the English Channel, coast-crawling in a motor-cruiser, which is why he hadn’t answered your nephew’s letter. We came along to find out how you were situated and whether there is anything we can do.”

“Well, it is extremely kind of you, but I don’t think there is anything to be done. The council are paying my salary until the end of the month and I believe I am to get a small honorarium, but after that I must find employment if I can. My nephew’s parents—my brother and his wife—have offered me a home, but naturally I do not want to be a burden on them. For one thing, my brother is not far off retirement and when he does retire their resources will be limited. In any case, I would not wish to sacrifice my

independence, although, at my age, I think I shall experience some difficulty in finding any post for which I am fitted."

"I could offer you a temporary job, if you did not think it beneath you," said Timothy. "For ten weeks I am to be a grass widower while my wife takes a temporary post at her old school. This means that I badly need a housekeeper. Would you consider such a position? I do so much wish you would."

"I would consider anything, Mr. Herring! It is most kind of you. But, really, it's quite wrong of me to be thinking about myself at a time like this."

"Nonsense! That's settled, then. And now I wonder whether you will tell us all about this extraordinary accident? We were a little curious about the woman's name. Was she a foreigner of some sort?"

"Oh, no, but she was the widow of an Indian. That accounts for the name. There have been police all over the place until yesterday, but I think they have finished their investigations now. At any rate, they've gone, so it will be all right, I think, to show you where the accident happened and to tell you what I know about it, which I'm afraid is very little."

The two men accompanied her into the garden which had once been the cloister-garth. The front doors of the Tudor cottages were closed and there was no trace of the accident which had resulted in the death of Mrs. Dasti except for a break in the line of chimney-stacks. Any débris had been cleared away and the deserted scene had its own melancholy.

"Where have they taken the old ladies?" asked Timothy.

"Oh, the oldest of all, five of them, are in the geriatric ward of the big hospital at Ownham. The others are in temporary accommodation, except for two whose relatives are prepared to take them until the new almshouses are

built. Well, you can see for yourselves which of the chimney-stacks came down.” She pointed to the rooftops.

“We couldn’t help wondering why the police have asked for an adjournment of the inquest,” said Timothy.

“Was there something unsatisfactory about the identification of the body, or the medical report, or something?”

“Oh, there was no doubt about the identification, and, of course, a very detailed account of each cottager comes to the council—*came*, I suppose I should say—and then was passed on to myself before anyone is—was—admitted here. The medical evidence also was clear enough, so far as it went.” She hesitated so long that Timothy put a question at the same moment as she began to speak again.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, as their words coincided.

“No, please . . . Oh, well, I’m not sure whether I ought to disclose this, but I don’t think the doctor told me in confidence what he must later have told the police.”

“Oh, really? What was that?”

“The doctor agrees that Mrs. Dasti was killed by a blow on the head, but he doesn’t think the falling chimney-stack did it.”

“Where, exactly, did the chimney-pot fall, then?”

“In Mrs. Dasti’s little garden plot at the back. The plots are very tiny and were really intended so that the women could hang out their bits of personal washing—their sheets were collected each week and sent to the laundry—and also so that they could have a fence between them and the river. The main channel runs quite close to the cottages at the back and some of the old ladies occasionally had young grandchildren brought to see them, and I expect you know what a great attraction water has for small children.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Parsons. “So Mrs. Dasti was in her back garden when the chimney fell?”

“Well, that’s where she was found, but the odd thing is that it wasn’t Mrs. Dasti’s pot which fell. It came from Mrs.

Baines's roof, three cottages away."

"And fell in Mrs. Dasti's garden? That does seem unaccountable," said Timothy. "Which was Mrs. Dasti's cottage, then?"

"This one. And another coincidence is that Mrs. Baines was over in the infirmary at the time, suffering from an attack of summer colic. I think she had been given some unripe plums and had eaten them raw when the sensible thing would have been to stew them with sugar."

"I wonder whether, on our way out, you would allow us to take a look at the cottages from the back?" said Timothy. "Mr. Parsons and I did stroll round that way when we were here before, but if Mrs. Dasti was in her back garden when she was killed, it might be helpful if we saw the roofs from that side." He counted along the row. "I see that Mrs. Dasti's was number six."

"Please look at anything you like, if you think it will be of any help. My nephew is with me, as I expect you know, but he can suggest nothing, although, of course, I am glad to have his company. I'm afraid you will have to go all the way round the buildings if you want to get to the backs of the cottages. The path follows the river, which winds in a big loop round Lady Matilda's Rest. Would you care to have a word with Wilfred before you go?"

"Your nephew? Oh, yes, I'd like to see him," said Timothy. "There are one or two queries in the Society's correspondence that he'll probably be able to settle."

Young Coningsby seemed pleased to see them and was grateful for the leave of absence from his duties. While the warden went off to make a pot of tea, Timothy asked him whether he had any theories.

"About the death of Mrs. Dasti?" said Coningsby. "Well, I understand that the pieces of the chimney-pot were lying around her in her little back garden, but she couldn't have been killed there, you know. She must have been in Mrs. Baines's garden for some reason, mustn't she?—and

somebody moved the body and the bits of the chimney to her own. Not very bright thinking, in my opinion, Mr. Herring, but, of course, most murderers are amateurs."

CHAPTER NINE

Speculation and an Inquest

“But cry thee Mercy: exercise thy nailes
To scratch or claw, so that thy tongue not
railes:
Some numbers prurient are, and some of
these
Are wanton with their itch; scratch, and ’twill
please.”

To the Detracter

Allowing Coningsby’s somewhat thought-provoking remarks to go unchallenged, the two men, accompanied by Miss Coningsby-Layton, went out by the lower door of her tower, took leave of her, and strolled under the archway past the porter’s lodge. They turned their heads as Timothy heard his name called. The porter, whom Timothy recognised from his first visit to the almshouses, caught up with them.

“You’ll have heard what’s happened to us, sir,” he said.
“Very strange doings, if you ask my opinion.”

“Strange?” said Timothy. “Lamentable, I think, but why strange?”

“More in this than meets the eye, sir. Why should all our old ladies be hustled off like this just because an accident happens? That’s what I ask myself.”

“I should have thought it was obvious. The cottages are not considered safe. How are you yourself placed?”

“Not too good, sir. They’ve offered me a park-keeper’s job over in the town. Not what I’ve been used to, sir. They’ve give me a house, too—I will say that for the council—but I got to pay rent, which I never did here. But it’s poor Miss Coningsby-Layton as I feel most sorry for. A lady of her years and refinement to be thrown out like an empty bottle, sir, not good enough, that is not, and I don’t mind who hears me say it.”

“Your sympathy isn’t altogether necessary,” said Timothy. “Miss Coningsby-Layton will be all right. We’ve just been hearing about it. I don’t terribly take to that man,” he added to Tom Parsons, as they turned to the right at the great gates and took a field-path towards the river.

“Underneath his concern I detected insolence, I thought.”

“The council seem to be looking after his interests better than those of Miss Coningsby-Layton, but perhaps a man of his age is easier to place than a lady of hers. She would be at a bit of a loose end if you hadn’t taken her on. Why don’t you like the caretaker?” asked Parsons. “I thought his concern was genuine enough.”

“Oh, it’s one of those Dr. Fell things, then. What do you make of Coningsby’s remark about the chimney-pot?”

“Reasonable enough, of course. I’d like to attend the inquest. Just depends what I’ve got on hand whether I can make it.”

“I shall go.” The path led them again to the right. They followed it behind the Tudor infirmary and the east end of the church, after which it bent to the right once more to continue along the complete length of that small but perfect building. A tall fence marked off part of the grounds and then the path brought the two men on to the bank of the river at the backs of the almshouses. The privet hedges which separated the gardens one from another were low, had been well-clipped, and were in good repair, but the long fence which cut off the ends of the tiny plots from the

river bank was broken in several places and needed attention all along its length.

"It doesn't look as though some of the visiting grandchildren would have been all that safe from falling into the river, does it?" said Tom Parsons, standing still and casting his eye over the neglected timbering.

"It's funny, you know," said Timothy, "but when I first heard what had happened I took it for granted that the old lady had been killed at the *front* of her cottage. I think I had visualised her seated on one of those wooden benches they had, and the thing suddenly falling on her before she had a chance to move out of the way. Odd how one gets these ideas."

"It seems so unlikely," said Parsons, as they turned back on to the path and retraced their steps round the building to where they had left Timothy's car, "that a chimney should have crashed into that garden from such a long way off. Coningsby must be right. Somebody moved the body."

"I think the medical evidence is against the chimney-pot theory. It couldn't really have happened, you know. That's what's bothering the police—the complete incredibility of the thing. I don't wonder they've adjourned the inquest."

"But who would kill a poor old almswoman intentionally? That doesn't make sense, either. And didn't the others know anything about it? I suppose they've all been questioned, and Miss Coningsby-Layton, too. Oh, well, we shall know all the answers later on, I hope. Anyway, council or no council, it's certainly put an end to Lady Matilda's Rest."

Timothy accompanied Miss Coningsby-Layton to the inquest and she was also escorted by her nephew, who had taken another day's leave from the Phisbe headquarters in

order to be present. Alison had gone down to Dorset to put in a few days of acclimatisation before term began, but Parsons had returned from the north of England where he had been to look at the proposed site for a new town hall and, after the inquest, was to spend the night at Timothy's Cotswold home.

The town council was represented by a solicitor and Timothy called in another (who always acted for Phisbe) in order to safeguard Miss Coningsby-Layton's interests. The question of negligence, however, did not arise, or, rather, when it did arise, was very easily disposed of. In fact, Timothy thought, except that hearsay evidence was admitted, the inquest might almost have been the case which the magistrates would have presented to them later.

"Evidence of identification was taken at the previous hearing and is not in doubt," said the coroner, "but the police have pursued their enquiries since that time and I think a recapitulation of the medical evidence might be useful. Call Dr. Ransome."

Dr. Ransome was the medical man who had been called in by Miss Coningsby-Layton when the body of Mrs. Dasti had been discovered. He was asked to give a full account of his findings.

"I received a telephone message at just after two o'clock in the afternoon of August 23, asking me to go at once to the Lady Matilda almshouses as a fatality had occurred there."

"That would have been a Sunday, of course."

"On a Sunday, yes. I had just finished my lunch and had no other emergency calls, so I went at once, and was taken to the back garden of number six of the cottages to examine the body of an elderly woman whom I now know to have been Mrs. Martha Dasti, an inmate of the almshouses."

"You examined the body?"

"I did."

"And to what conclusion did you come?"

"I concluded that the woman had been dead for between twelve and fifteen hours."

"What did you find was the cause of death?"

"The deceased had been struck on the head with extreme force. Do you wish me to repeat the clinical details? I gave them in full at the preliminary enquiry."

"They will mean very little to the jury. You mean that the force employed was sufficient to have caused death?"

"Such was my opinion at the time, and I remain of that opinion."

"Did you come to any conclusion as to the means by which the blow had been struck?"

"Yes, at the time the means seemed obvious. The deceased was lying among the fragments of what appeared to be a chimney-pot. I deduced that this had fallen and—to use a colloquialism—brained her."

"Do you now have any cause to alter your opinion as to the cause of death?"

"Yes, I altered my opinion that a falling chimney was the cause. This was after consultation with Dr. Modder, who is the police surgeon for this district."

"Perhaps we will hear what Dr. Modder has to say. You are in agreement, I take it?"

"We are in full agreement, including the factor which puzzles us."

"What would that be?"

"We are in agreement that the cause of death could not have been the chimney-pot, owing to the nature of the wound, but we have come to no conclusion as to what else could have been responsible, except that it was flat and very heavy."

"Thank you, Doctor. Call Dr. Modder."

"I was sent for by Detective-Superintendent Dunne after my colleague, Dr. Ransome, had informed Miss Coningsby-Layton, the warden of Lady Matilda's Rest, that

it was necessary to send for the police, as an inquest would be called for before a death certificate could be issued," said the police surgeon. "Having examined the body, I looked to see how the chimney could have fallen, and I concluded from my observations (which, I must add, were directed by Detective-Superintendent Dunne) that the broken shards which were scattered on and around the body could not have come from the chimney of the deceased's own dwelling, since that was still intact. The pot of a stack three cottages away was missing, but, in my opinion, nothing short of an earthquake or a bombing raid could have carried it the distance it appeared to have travelled. The superintendent was of the same opinion, so I met Dr. Ransome and we made a further examination of the body. In consequence we are agreed that some other cause of death must be found."

"But about that you have come to no conclusion?"

"None. Except that the deceased was killed either by some heavy object, other than the chimney pot, falling upon her head, or by a blow accidentally or deliberately inflicted, we have come to no conclusion."

Miss Coningsby-Layton came next. Her contribution was less officially-worded but was full of interest.

"As it was Sunday," she said, "our arrangements were a little different from those in operation on other days of the week. It used to be the case, before my appointment as warden, for the inmates to attend compulsory church services at eight o'clock and eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings and also at half-past six on Sunday evenings.

"I thought this a little arbitrary. I decided that my old ladies—some of whom were in their eighties and nineties—should be allowed an undisturbed Sunday morning, particularly since our own little church was served only once a month owing to pressure on the local clergy. I found that for three out of four Sundays my pensioners were obliged to walk a mile to attend the village church or

chapel three times a day, a total of six miles. The incidence of feigned illness on such Sundays was a factor which influenced my decision, but, apart from that, I felt that my old ladies were not physically capable of so much exertion on what has been called the day of rest.

"Fortunately I met with no overt official disapproval of what I considered to be my programme of reform, for I had instituted a new rule to the effect that the eight o'clock service was optional, even when our own church was in use, that the eleven o'clock service was also optional except on every fourth Sunday, when all they had to do was to cross the quadrangle, and that the six-thirty service was not to be attended by anybody without written permission from me. In its place I instituted a hymn-singing session in the dining-hall after a seven o'clock supper."

"Had you any reason for banning the evening church-going, Miss Coningsby-Layton?" asked the coroner.

"I believed I had an excellent reason, but it has nothing to do with the scope of this enquiry."

"The old girls sloped off to the boozer," said an uncouth voice.

"Very well, if you are sure it has no bearing on it," said the coroner, ignoring the unseemly interruption and continuing with the witness. "You mention that your arrangements for Sundays were different from those in operation on the other days of the week. Did they apply to anything other than the church services?"

"Yes, they did. The meal-times were differently arranged. I mention this because, otherwise, it might seem strange that Mrs. Dasti could have been dead for so many hours before her body was discovered."

"Ah, yes, the court would like to have that point elucidated. Please go on."

"Breakfast was at nine on Sundays. This was to allow any who wished to attend Communion to be able to do so and still get back to Lady Matilda's Rest in time for their

meal. The others—most of the inmates, as it happened—took what I believe is called a long lie-in. As breakfast was so late, the midday dinner was not until two o'clock instead of the week-day half-past twelve. I made a point of presiding at this, the main meal of the day, and I noticed, after I had said grace and the serving-up had begun, that Mrs. Dasti's place was empty. I made enquiries, contacted the porter, and ordered him to go over to the matron of the infirmary to find out whether Mrs. Dasti had been taken ill and, if so, why I had received no report, but, receiving no satisfaction, I myself visited Mrs. Dasti's cottage—I have a master-key, needless to say, to all the dwellings—and discovered the body. It was not in the cottage, but was lying in the back garden. I immediately telephoned Dr. Ransome and he notified the police as soon as he had examined the body. At this point I would like to pay tribute to Dr. Ransome's help and support in what, to me, was an extremely horrifying and difficult situation."

"Quite, quite. A very dreadful experience for you, I'm sure. Had you any reason to think that the chimneys might be unsafe?" asked the coroner.

"On the contrary. At my instigation the council sent workmen, only about six months ago, to inspect and repair them. They were very old, of course, and presented a somewhat curious appearance, but, to the best of my knowledge and belief, they were in a perfectly safe condition."

This opinion was confirmed by the town surveyor, who stated that the work had been done under his personal supervision and that he had tested the results.

"Nothing short of a force-ten gale could have shifted one of those pots," he informed the coroner, "and, as it happens, this has been a remarkably mild spring and summer. And even a gale couldn't have taken that pot as far as it was carried," he added. "Somebody must have

monkeyed with it and taken it off and smashed it where it was found.”

“I’m afraid we can’t deal in theories of that kind,” said the coroner. “Call Detective-Superintendent Dunne.”

The police report followed the lines of the medical report.

“Unable to account for the débris of the chimney-pot being in that particular spot, and in the light of the medical evidence presented to us when a full examination of the body had been made, we had no option but to seek for another means of the deceased having been killed by a blow on the head,” said Detective-Superintendent Dunne. “Furthermore, we have had the roofs and chimneys tested and inspected, and they are in a safe condition. We have looked in vain for the aforesaid other lethal object, but without success. Furthermore, we should wish to ascertain what, so far, has not been ascertained, and that is for what reason the deceased was out of her bed and in her back garden at some time between the hours of eleven p.m. on the Saturday and two a.m. on the following Sunday morning, as we understand that lights out at Lady Matilda’s Rest was always observed at ten p.m., the porter being under orders to turn the electricity off at the main at that hour. With the total absence of bloodstains where the body was found, we have also come to the conclusion that the deceased died elsewhere than in her own back garden, but we are not able to state, so far as our investigations have gone, where she might have met her death, or who moved the body to where it was found.”

The porter, who appeared clad in the black clothes, boots, and tie which he had worn at Mrs. Dasti’s funeral, agreed that Lights Out was at ten o’clock and asserted positively that he had always carried out his orders in this respect, as the warden, he ventured to believe, would testify, “her own lights going out the same as everybody else’s and she being reduced to depending on an oil lamp if

she wanted to sit up later than ten, although her radio was run off a battery, not that that was much trouble, being a transistor set," added the porter.

Further questions elicited a fact which indicated that Miss Coningsby-Layton's rule, although liberal and sympathetic, took the form of a benevolent despotism. One of his duties was to book the old ladies out and in when they left the almshouses to go for a walk into the village or the town, "it being, at their age," said the porter, "just as well to keep tabs on them, as it were, for their own safety."

It further transpired that most of them went in couples, and that Miss Coningsby-Layton preferred it that way, as she had often told him. The dead woman, however, usually went out alone on Saturdays, although at other times she took a companion with her.

"And did you ever remark upon these solitary Saturday jaunts of hers?" asked the coroner.

"Not to her, sir. It was no business of mine. I clocked her out and I clocked her in—or my wife did—and that was all there was to it, but I reckon I know what the answer was. They used to be issued with their week's pocket-money on Friday evenings, and I reckon she liked to spend hers on a Saturday on her own, like, without anybody else knowing what she bought, or having to treat any of them to any of it. Some of our old ladies were secretive like that, especially with sweets, and you can't hardly blame them, seeing how little they had to spend."

"Had she been out on the Saturday under review?"

"Oh, no, sir. Well, not so far as I know. That's to say, she never passed out by my lodge, sir, and that I'll swear to, come what may."

He was followed by the old woman whose chimney-pot had been found in ruins in Mrs. Dasti's back garden. Timothy, who was feeling sentimental about the dead woman and her clandestine spending of her bit of pocket-money, could not understand at first why the lessee of the

chimney had been called. It turned out, however, that she had an important contribution to make. Timothy recognised her as an old friend. She was the woman whose wooden bench he had shared on his first visit to Lady Matilda's Rest, and he waited with interest to hear what she would have to say.

"Now, Mrs. Baines," said the coroner encouragingly, "I believe you have something to tell us which has a bearing, albeit a negative one, on what the porter has just said."

"Eh?"

"The porter tells us that he kept a little black book in which he noted down the times when you ladies left your houses and came back to them."

"So he thinks."

"Well, suppose you tell us, just in your own words, what really did happen."

"He's a busybody, that's what he is. Yes, and a right nosey parker, too and all. They're all busybodies. Take our pensions, they do, and what do we get for it? Bread and scrape and never joint and two veg. except on a Sunday, and then we has to wait 'til two o'clock for it, so's we won't eat so much tea and supper. Supper! Cheese or cold meat and not even so much as a pickled onion to go with it. A rotten lot they are, if you asks me. There's only one out of the whole boilin' of 'em as I ever had any use for, and, of course, they only let him talk to me once. Afraid of what I'd tell 'im, I daresay, and no wonder! Picked up me stitches, he did . . ." she pointed dramatically at Timothy . . . "and him a gentleman born, as anybody could bear witness to."

"Yes, yes, of course," said the coroner, "but we were talking about you ladies leaving your cottages and making your little excursions into the town."

"Him with his pencil and his book!" She glared at the porter. "I wonder he don't call hisself the recordin' angel and have done with it. 'Oh yes! Mrs. Baines, ain't it? And where are we off to today, Mrs. Baines? Two penn'orth of

sherbet dabs, is it, or are we 'aving a couple put on the slate at the Pig and Whistle?' Fair makes you sick, he do, with his nasty indoo-end-you. End us? I reckon he'd of liked to! Well, somebody have ended poor old Mattie Dasti, ain't they? And I wouldn't put *that* past 'im, neether, the buggerin' umbug!"

"Please, *please*, Mrs. Baines! You must *not* use that kind of language in my court!"

"Sorry, I'm sure, sir. But thinking of that . . ."

"Yes, yes, but . . ."

"I kind of get carried away. Well, as I was sayin' before you interrupted me, there's more ways of gettin' out of chokey nor by climbin' a wall." She looked triumphantly round the courtroom. "Yes, more ways nor one, too an' all," she asserted, nodding her head.

"Ah, yes, now we are coming to it," said the coroner. "I believe you told the police . . ."

"I did that. Not as they seem to 'ave made much use of it. Where's the odds, I said, in us ladies takin' a bit of a walk—only occasional-like, of course—where's the odds, I said, in us nippin' out the back way for a change, without 'aving to check out and check in like a lot of bloody schoolkids? What's the good of a bit of broken fence that isn't overlooked from nowhere, I said, if a lady can't slip out and back when her fancy takes 'er, I said."

"I believe you are referring to the fact that part of the back fence has been broken down. Do you remember when that first happened?"

"No, I don't. Nor do I know whether it fell or whether it was pushed, although I might make a guess if anybody paid me for it."

"I think you are telling us that Mrs. Dasti used to get in and out of Lady Matilda's Rest that way. Is that what you wish us to understand?"

"Well, what if she did? And what if her friends came to see her that way, too? Is it any odds to anybody?"

"How do you know people came to see her?"

"I never said I did know. There ain't no windows at the back of them little bunny-'utches, so how's anybody to see anything?"

"You were in the infirmary, I believe, when your chimney fell down. Did you see or hear anything?"

"No, I never. Nor didn't nobody else, because I asked 'em. I was too busy on the trot, being troubled with me inside."

"Thank you, Mrs. Baines. That will be all. Call Miss Armitage. Miss Armitage, you are matron of the infirmary at Lady Matilda's Rest?"

"I *was* the matron until the occupants were dispersed. I am now on the staff of a private nursing home at Bramblesands-on-Sea."

"Will you tell the court what you saw on the afternoon of Saturday, August 22?"

"I saw two men on the roof of the almshouses."

"What did they appear to be doing?"

"I could not say. They seemed to be looking at one of the chimneys. I did not pay any particular attention. I assumed that the council had sent them."

"Where were you when you saw them?"

"In the large ward. We had two wards. The larger was for all general purposes, but we had a small isolation ward for infectious or contagious cases."

"So you saw the men from the windows in the larger ward?"

"Yes. At the superintendent's request I took the police into the ward so that they could obtain the same view of the cottages as I had. You see, as soon as I heard about the fallen chimney-pot, I thought I had better report what I had seen to Miss Coningsby-Layton, because I wondered whether the men had been careless and had dropped the pot and knew they had injured Mrs. Dasti and had panicked and made off."

“Would not that have been a surprising thing to do, if they were council workmen?”

“I have really no idea. People are so very irresponsible nowadays that I wouldn’t know what to be surprised at.”

“How long do you think the men were there?”

The police asked me that. I saw them first at three o’clock on the Saturday afternoon, but how long they had been there and how long they stayed I could not possibly tell you. I do not spend my time looking out of windows. I have something better to do.”

“So you cannot say exactly what the men were doing except that it was something to do with a chimney?”

“When I saw them they only seemed to be looking at it.”

“Thank you, Miss Armitage. Call Conway West.”

Conway West was a small, neatly-dressed man with a determined expression.

“No council workmen were sent to Lady Matilda’s Rest on the Saturday afternoon of August 22, or any other Saturday afternoon,” he said. “Saturday afternoons mean overtime pay and we have the rates to consider. It would have to be an emergency of an unprecedented kind to cause us to send out on a Saturday afternoon and, to the best of my knowledge, we have never done so. Whatever men they were, they were not our men.”

“Well,” said the coroner, “unless the police wish to call any more witnesses . . .”

“Here,” said a cracked and ancient voice from the body of the courtroom, “ain’t I going to ’ave my say?”

“Who is that person?” asked the coroner of the coroner’s officer who had been engaged in swearing in the witnesses.

“Unknown to me, sir. I think she may be one of the old ladies from the institution.”

“Then her evidence might be useful.” He raised his voice. “Will you come forward please?”

Timothy, who had recognised an old acquaintance, muttered to Coningsby, who was sitting next to him, that this was the old lady who had hoped that the almshouses would be condemned. "Wonder what she's got to say?" he added. The old woman was sworn, gave her name and address, and, when these were repeated to her in the form of questions, replied acidly,

"I just told you, didn't I?"

"Merely a formality, madam," said the coroner benignly "Are you a former inhabitant of Lady Matilda's Rest?"

"That's me, Caroline Plumb, and thankful to see the last of the buggerin' place, I can tell you."

"Well, Mrs. Plumb, what else have you to tell us? Just take your time and let us have it in your own words."

"You ain't a lawyer, be you?"

"I am the coroner."

"What's the difference?"

"I am here to enquire into the circumstances of the death of Mrs. Matilda Dasti. If you have any knowledge which will help me, you must tell me what it is."

"Dusty she called herself, and dusty she was, I make no doubt. Dirty 'ud be more like it. Had 'er secrets, if you take my meaning. But they wasn't so secret as what she fancied, the mean skinflint old bitch."

"What kind of secrets do you mean? You mustn't waste the time of the court by indulging in vulgar gossip, you know."

"Vulgar is it? I'd have you know, young man, as I'm a respectable widow woman livin' with my niece what is living in lawful wedlock (as not everyone can claim) with a good husband what's got a nice place in Ipswich and has give me a home, which I could not expect more from my own son . . ."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Plumb, but please let us get back to Mrs. Dasti. You said she had secrets. Are you trying to tell

us that you know something which bears upon the mystery of her death?"

"I'm not *tryin'* to tell you. I'm *tellin'* you, only you won't let me get a word in edgeways. Do you want to hear what I have got to say, or don't you?"

"By all means. By all means. Please go on."

"Right. Well, all I got to tell you is as Mattie Dasti 'ad *something to sell*."

"Was there anything wrong in that?"

"How should I know? All I asks is: what did she do with the money? Used to go to 'Orsbridge covered market, she did, regular."

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Plumb," said the coroner. "It was kind of you to come along, but I think that is all we need to hear."

"I follered 'er, you see, and that's 'ow I got to know. 'Er and 'er buggerin' old Saturdays! Above board one Saturday and under the counter the next. That was the way of it, and so I tells you."

"Yes, yes. Well, I think that will be all. Tittle-tattle of that kind will do nothing to help this inquiry. We have already heard that you ladies had a back way out from your cottages."

"Suit yourself. There's none so deaf as them what *won't* 'ear." She glared resentfully at him, gave her black tam o'shanter a rakish push, and returned to her seat in the court, muttering slanderous criticisms of the coroner.

The verdict was murder by person or persons unknown.

"What the coroner *didn't* ask, you know," said Timothy to Coningsby, as they left the court, "is whether Mrs. Dasti was at supper that Saturday night." He put the question to Miss Coningsby-Layton when they had joined her in the street.

"Oh, dear! I'm sure I couldn't say," she replied. "Supper was an unsupervised meal and was quite optional. They simply helped themselves, and if anybody didn't turn up to

it on a Saturday no notice would be taken. It would be assumed that she had bought food with her pocket-money and was having a brew-up and a secret feast in her own cottage, that is all."

"I thought the coroner was a bit hasty in dismissing Mrs. Plumb. It might have been interesting to know what Mrs. Dasti went to market to sell."

"Poor old thing! Possibly some little possessions of her own, to raise a few extra pence. I always was making representations to the council that their five shillings pocket-money was quite inadequate, considering the price of everything nowadays."

"I received the impression, you know, that her visits to the market were regular," said Timothy, "but she could hardly have had something of her own to sell *every* Saturday, could she?"

CHAPTER TEN

Desultory Conversation

“Small griefs find tongues: Full Casques are
ever found
To give, (if any, yet) but little sound.
Deep waters noyse-lesse are; And this we
know,
That chiding streams betray small depth
below.
*To His Mistress Objecting to Him Neither Toying
or Talking*

“But it all hangs together! Can’t you see that it does?” said Timothy, when they had dropped Coningsby and his aunt and were on their way westwards.

“Well, I can see what you mean,” said Parsons dubiously, “but these garrulous old women will say anything.”

“It wasn’t only the old women. See how it all adds up.”

“Yes . . . I suppose you’re making allowance for feminine spite?”

“I don’t think women are any more spiteful than men. I grant they don’t take to community life so well. Anyway, listen to this, and check me if I go wrong.”

“I think you’ve allowed Warlock Hall to get on your nerves, you know.”

“I note that you *do* see what I mean. Here’s this poor old soul, English as they come, but the widow of an Indian.

Here are these palliasses and camp beds discovered at the Hall, together with three sinister characters who, until my inopportune arrival, had a foolproof base from which to operate. Here, to go back to Mrs. Dasti, is a sympathetic go-between with access to the river and the means of leaving her habitation by means of the back door and in perfect secrecy whenever she liked. Do you mean to tell me that there isn't a link, and a strong one, somewhere or other, in all this?"

"If there is, I don't notice it. How could she help to smuggle in illegal immigrants, however sympathetic to them she might be?—and *that* still has to be proved. She may have hated her deceased husband's guts and repudiated all his kin, for all you know."

"I don't think she did help to smuggle in illegal immigrants. I grant you that such would be beyond her scope. But don't you think perhaps those three beauties are bringing in more than illegal immigrants? What about a profitable side-line in cannabis or something?"

"Even so, I can't see what use Mrs. Dasti could have been to them, except as . . ."

"Exactly. Except as a pusher. Look, Tom, it's so obvious. They bring the stuff over when they bring in the immigrants. They land the Indians at my decrepit landing-stage and park them up at the Hall until they can safely let them loose with forged documents. Then they bring the dope up as far as the mill in the motor-cruiser I'm pretty sure they possess, unship it, keep a small boat—a rowing-boat of some sort, or a punt, because it wouldn't do to have an outboard engine sputtering away at the dead of night outside those almshouses with a dozen inquisitive old ladies being woken up by the noise on the further side of the mill, and there is their contact and pusher, old Mrs. Dasti, with a back entrance to her cottage which can't even be overlooked by the other denizens because there are no back windows to the almshouses. They simply pass the

stuff to her and all she has to do is to store it in her cupboard or somewhere until she makes her Saturday jaunt to the town with the cast-iron excuse of spending her week's pocket-money. Who's going to suspect her? It sticks out a mile that that is what's been going on."

"Oh, but, really, my dear chap! An old woman in an almshouse? Apart from anything else, where would she have got the know-how?"

"I should say she got it from her husband. He would have shown her the ropes, because she'd have had to be told what he and his friends were up to, so that she wouldn't innocently give the game away by indulging in that 'loose talk' we used to hear about from our parents who remember the last war, and then, when he died, she was so deeply involved that she had no alternative but to carry on with his nefarious enterprises."

"I had no idea you were such an addict of fairy tales."

"These are no fairy tales. Open any newspaper on any day you like. It will be full of accounts of dope-pushing, gun-running, smuggling of all kinds. You name it, somebody does it. Besides, we must still remember the poor but far from blameless Mrs. Dasti. You know the verdict at the inquest, and there isn't a doubt but it was the right one. It only fell short in one particular. Murder, yes. But murder by person or persons unknown is begging the question. To my way of thinking, the persons *are* known, and the names of two of them are Jabez Gee and Kilbride Colquhoun Macbeth, although the Colquhoun, of course, is a pseudonym.

"Are you going to the police with your suspicions?"

"No. That Detective Chief-Superintendent (to give him full regimental honours) is quite hep to the situation, I'm certain. Apart from that, so far I have so little proof of what I've been setting out to you that I don't think he'd greet me with open arms if I did go to him. I haven't even the evidence—slight, in any case—of the palliasses in the

undercroft any more, because they've all been sent elsewhere and another base found by Jabez and Company."

"So your interest is merely academic? Well, so long as that's your lot."

"Oh, yes. I think matters can safely be left to the police. They're as capable of smelling a rat as I am and, with their far wider resources, much more capable of nailing it to the mast."

"Well, I think you're wise not to mix yourself up any more in it."

"All the same, I yearn for a heart-to-heart with Mother Plumb, if only to hear what she thought of the coroner."

"Leave well alone is my guiding principle."

"Oh, well, to employ an expression which never fails to arouse the devil in Alison, we'll see."

"Are you getting into mischief?" asked Alison, when Timothy called for her on the following Friday.

"Certainly not. What put such a thought into your head?"

"Well," she said, almost wistfully, "you always used to get into mischief before you married me, I expect, and I thought you might like to step high, wide, and plentiful now you haven't got me around your neck all the time."

"How are things going?"

"All right, I think. The Sixth don't seem to need me, except occasionally as an advice bureau."

"They consult you about their love-lives?"

"Of course not. I meant about their work."

"Oh, I see. I wondered whether you'd become the local Marjorie Proops. Do you see anything of the young gentlemen, so-called?"

"So-called be sugared! We have thirty of them, all told, and they're perfectly charming. I take them twice a week for drama and we're putting on *Sweeney Todd* for

Christmas. Their carpentry master is doing the trap-door and the whole thing is immensely popular. Boys, of course, are far better actors than girls."

"And *Sweeney Todd* is right up their street, of course, the unwashed little thugs."

"They're not unwashed and they're not thugs."

"I bet *Sweeney Todd* wasn't your own idea."

"No. I'd thought of *Brother Sun*, but we can do that for Easter."

"Hey! One term is the agreed length of your sentence, so no nonsense about Easter!"

"Oh, I wouldn't be on the staff, of course. It would only mean a few rehearsals. Tell me about the inquest."

"Whose idea was *Sweeney Todd*, then?—the carpentry bloke's, so that he could catch the boss's eye and show Sabrina how clever he is at making trap-doors for the stage?"

"No. P.-B. thought of it. She thought it would be an outlet for the boys and, of course, it is. I've managed to get all of them in it, even if they only 'walk on,' and Sweeney Todd himself is a genius. I could do Shakespeare with this lot if I were staying on. I've spotted a perfect Malvolio and a Sir Andrew Aguecheek who would only need a bit of coaching."

"What about Viola, Olivia, and Maria?"

"Oh, girls' parts are pie to these boys. After all, they were written for boys, and these children, before they get to the spotty stage, have the most heavenly complexions and are as graceful as sea-serpents."

"Hm! What price Coleridge?"

"Meaning what?"

"'Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.'"

“Don’t be so utterly revolting. Anyway, if you must *Ancient Mariner* me, don’t forget his description of the watersnakes, which is what I was thinking of, as well you know.

‘ . . . Blue, glossy green, and velvet black
They coil’d and swam: and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.’

“One thing I do is to take the boys swimming, if you want to know.”

Timothy smiled at her.

“All right, all right,” he said. He rolled his eyes at her, and added, “What about Sir Toby Belch? You could never get a young boy to portray that magnificent windbag.”

“Yes, he might be a problem. A boy would probably want to play him merely as a clottish drunkard with a cushion stuffed up his doublet. I should have to take them to see the play well acted and well produced. Boys are wonderful mimics.”

“Sedulous apes, in fact. Well, you fill me with the most serious misgivings. You seem far too keen on this teaching lark to minister and subscribe to my peace of mind. How can you be so crool?”

“Because you still haven’t told me what happened at the inquest. It’s you who’s cruel, because I’m dying to hear all about it, and you keep fobbing me off with Coleridge and things. I know what the verdict was. That was in the paper; but I don’t have any of the details.”

Timothy was not averse to giving her an account of the proceedings at the inquest. He made it as objective as he could and then asked her what she thought of it. Alison refused to commit herself. All that she said was:

“I don’t understand why anybody went to the trouble of collecting a chimney-pot from a cottage three doors away and strewing the bits about as though the pot was the

cause of death. Surely they didn't think the police would be fooled by something which couldn't possibly have happened? Apart from that, I can understand why the infirmiry matron didn't take any notice when she saw what she thought were workmen on the roof, but what was Miss Coningsby-Layton thinking about? *She* must have known they had no business there."

"It was Saturday afternoon, remember. I expect you would find that, with so many of her old ladies out spending their weekly dole, she also went off for the afternoon. There is no reason why she shouldn't, and I don't suppose for an instant that she knew anything about the workmen on the roof until the police ferreted it out from the matron that she'd spotted them and got her to give evidence at the inquest. The matron would naturally think that Miss Coningsby-Layton knew all about it. That's the worst of being the man up top. Nobody tells you anything. They think you know, and no underling wants the reputation of being a busybody or a tattler."

"I suppose not. Are we going over to Herrings tomorrow?"

"Yes, if you like. The clearing-up ought to be nearly finished by now. The pond is the big job, but I left orders with the contractors, so they'll be getting on with it."

"And it *is* going to be turned into a swimming pool, isn't it?"

"It depends upon whether we're going to keep the place or whether I put it up for auction."

"I shall be terribly disappointed if it passes right out of our hands, but, even if it does, wouldn't a swimming pool help to bump up the price?"

"Yes, to an extent which very few people would be willing to consider."

"Oh, I see. Tim, why do you hate the house so much?"

"It's so damned ugly. It's a zombie of a house."

"How do you mean?"

“Well, it’s got all the fixings—great hall with minstrels’ gallery, stone-built undercroft (which must have cost a packet in a countryside where the only stone is flint), Elizabethan chamber complete with fine oriel window, long gallery turned into a library, the mediæval kitchens (when we’ve turned my great-uncle’s little suite back to its original use), newel stair—it ought to be marvellous and right up my street, but it isn’t. Somehow, it’s all lifeless and wrong.”

“Well, pull it down, then. It isn’t scheduled as a building which has to be preserved. Let’s build the country cottage we talked about, because now we’ve got the motor-cruiser it seems such a pity to let the whole place go.”

“All right. We’ll trail over there tomorrow . . . Oh, no! We can’t. I’m awfully sorry. I can’t go anywhere tomorrow. I forgot to tell you. Miss Coningsby-Layton is coming to give us the once-over and get a briefing from you. She’s going to housekeep for me until Christmas.”

“Oh, Tim, what a good idea! When do you expect her?”

“I got her on the ‘phone—she’s still at the warden’s lodging—and she thinks she can get over here soon after three. She’s got her own car. I said we’d put her up for the night. She can’t drive over here and back to Lady Matilda’s Rest in one day. At least, I suppose she could but I wouldn’t like it. Is that all right?”

“Yes, of course it’s all right. They’ve broken up the almshouses rather suddenly, haven’t they?”

“Well, there’s been a lot of publicity of a very unwelcome sort, and that has put pressure on the council. You know the sort of thing people say in the case of a woman like Mrs. Dasti. ‘Poor old thing! Murdered in her own back yard, and nobody to care whether she lived or died!’ I had a talk with the council chap who gave evidence and he told me that they’d had anonymous letters and signed complaints, too. People love it if they can wax all indignant. To my way of thinking, Mrs. Dasti was a dope-pedlar, but

that wouldn't weigh with *Indignant* and *Hands Off Our Old Age Pensioners* and all the others who write in at the drop of a hat without even bothering to find out the facts."

"Be reasonable, Tim. Nobody has ever said that she peddled dope, and it's a good thing if people *do* stick up for old age pensioners. I'm sure they have a very hard life of it with prices going up all the time."

"Too right, darling. I bow my diminished head."

"Even *you* don't know that about her—the dope, I mean. It's only a guess and even then there's nothing really to go on."

"True, true. Don't rub it in. All the same, I shall be interested to hear Miss Coningsby-Layton's views."

"Do you think she'll be able to find her way here? We're rather off the map."

"I promised to meet her in Stroud, or, rather, on the edge of Rodborough Common, and guide her here. I shall take the car, of course. Do you want to come?"

Miss Coningsby-Layton was only too anxious to discuss the inquest. She also had news about her own future.

"The council have offered me the post of curator of the museum when it is established, and that will be as soon as they can get the collection re-housed in the dining-room and kitchens at Lady Matilda's Rest," she said. "At present it is kept at the public library, where there is not enough room for it, so that a great number of the items have to be stored in the cellars there and are never on view. This appointment means that I shall be allowed to keep my present quarters and so, I'm afraid, Mr. Herring, that, after all, I shall not be able to accept your most kind and considerate offer of a position in your household, since I believe it would be unwise to give the council reason to think that I am able to find employment outside of their jurisdiction, and, of course, the post you so kindly offered

me would have been a temporary one. I'm so sorry, and so very grateful to you for your kindness."

"I quite understand," said Timothy, secretly thankful that he would not need to explain the introduction of a housekeeper to his good-tempered but highly sensitive cook, Mrs. Nealons, who, in fact, did the housekeeping with very little assistance from Alison. "I'm so glad the council has realised what it owes you for your years of service."

"They might easily have taken a different view," said Miss Coningsby-Layton. "Of course, I was told that the fact that my nephew is keeper of the archives at the headquarters of the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest has been a deciding factor in procuring me the appointment, so I am more than grateful to Phisbe. The inquest on poor Mrs. Dasti might have predisposed the council to blame me for all the very unwelcome publicity consequent on her death, but they have taken a broad and charitable view and have absolved me completely from any charge of negligence."

"I should hope so, too!" said Timothy. "I suppose you were out on the Saturday afternoon when the matron saw those men on the roof of one of the cottages?"

"Certainly I was, otherwise I should soon have enquired their business. I always went out on a Saturday. It was the only time for private shopping and a visit to my hairdresser, except for a quarterly meeting with the Ways and Means Committee to make my report to the council, and that took place on fourth Wednesdays and in the evening. I don't think anybody truthfully could accuse me of negligence, but, of course, scapegoats have to be found and I would not have been surprised to find my head on the block about this dreadful business. What I keep asking myself, Mr. Herring, is the reason for Mrs. Dasti's death. Who would want to kill an old age pensioner living in an almshouse? It seems so senseless, as well as being so cruel."

“What did you know about Mrs. Dasti prior to her entry into Lady Matilda’s Rest? It seems to me that there must have been something in her past to account for her murder, unless, of course, she was consorting with criminals while she was actually in residence with you. Did you ever suspect that your old ladies had the means of leaving their cottages secretly by way of that broken fence?”

“Well, I guessed, of course,” said Miss Coningsby-Layton, surprising Timothy by making this admission, “and I was rather worried about it. It seemed better to know whether they were in or out. All the same, I sympathise with their attitude and I have tried, on a number of occasions, to get an obsolete and irritating rule altered—I mean the rule which made them sign on and off at the porter’s lodge. However, I always met with the most determined opposition from council members. We are told that all power corrupts, but, apart from absolute power corrupting absolutely—Hitler was a case in point—it is my experience that a very little power in the hands of uneducated, petty officials has a most unfortunate effect on them. They cannot bear not to exercise their authority and, because their power is small, they exercise it only at the expense of those least able to resist it. I am not only referring to council members, but also to the porter.”

“Apart from knowing that your old ladies had the means of leaving the almshouses without going past the porter’s lodge, did you ever suspect that they might have clandestine visitors?” Timothy enquired.

“No, of course not. My views about that would have been different, and had I been in charge, say, of delinquent girls, I should have made certain that no such thing was possible, but who would ever think of such a thing in connection with respectable old women, all of them over seventy years of age? But you were asking me what I knew about Mrs. Dasti prior to her admission to Lady Matilda’s

Rest. I knew nothing apart from what was on the official papers. I have been looking them up—the council has a duplicate set, of course—and there is nothing helpful in them, so far as I am able to determine. However, I have brought them with me, because I knew you would be interested, otherwise you would not have taken the trouble to attend the inquest.”

The papers offered no information which would support Timothy’s theory. Mrs. Dasti had been born Matilda Matchlock and had married a man named Narayan Dasti in 1928. He had been born in England and had never left the country, so far as was known. His parents had come over as servants to an English family who had returned home from India and whose houseboy and ayah they were. On the death of their employers they had taken service at an Indian restaurant and their son had been educated at a school in Ipswich. He had been apprenticed to a cobbler, for he had given up his parents’ religion and become a member of the Church of England, so that dealings with leather—or what approximated to leather—no longer contaminated him. The couple had had two children, both of whom had died in infancy, and had moved soon after their marriage to the town whose council supported Lady Matilda’s Rest.

On the outbreak of the 1939 war, Narayan Dasti, then thirty-two years of age, had joined up and was invalided out in 1943. He had been mentioned in despatches and had been awarded a D.C.M. His widow had been taken on as cleaner at the local school and had applied, at the age of sixty-five, for admission to the almshouses. She had been elected in the following year and had been in residence for five years before she was killed. It was a straightforward account of an apparently blameless life. Of any suggestion that either she or her husband had been associated with malefactors of any kind there was none.

Timothy handed back the papers without commenting on them except to say:

"According to the evidence at the inquest, Mrs. Dasti appears to have been a rather solitary and secretive woman."

"Yes, I think she believed the others despised her because she had married an Indian. I'm sure she was wrong, but you know how people get ideas into their heads that no amount of argument can dispel," said Miss Coningsby-Layton.

"What about this allegation that on Saturdays, when the others were spending their pocket-money, she had something to sell in the town?"

"I think it was simply a spiteful remark."

"Spiteful, maybe, but mustn't there have been some truth in it? It was remarked on at the inquest, and it is very dangerous to tell lies when you are under oath."

"An ignorant old woman may not have considered that."

"Look, Miss Coningsby-Layton, I don't think there can be any doubt but that Mrs. Dasti did have clandestine visitors. Why shouldn't they have brought her something to flog in the town on Saturdays?" suggested Timothy.

"But what?"

"I had my own ideas about that, but, from the report on Mrs. Dasti which you have just shown me, they don't make as much sense as I thought they would, so I'd better not disclose them. How did you find Mrs. Dasti's conduct while she was a member of your little community?"

"Quite satisfactory. She would not have been allowed to remain with us for five years otherwise."

"I suppose it was left to you to turn a blind eye when you thought it advisable?"

"Well, no, Mr. Herring, I cannot agree about that. I was in a position of trust and the council's rules were strict and I followed them strictly."

“Even though you knew some of the old ladies some of the time went out and came in by the back door?”

“There was no actual *rule* about that,” said Miss Coningsby-Layton, with a slight smile, “and I had made several applications to the council to have that fence repaired. I imagine, though, that a child visitor would have had to drown before anything would have been done about it. Mr. Fortesque Aily always blocked that particular reform.”

“Fortescue Aily? Who’s he?”

“A very elegant and eloquent member of the General Purposes Committee, and a great friend of Mr. Lorrimer, who has a house and a small estate on the creek down-river from here, some miles on the further side of the mill.”

“Really? Then he must be a sort of neighbour of mine. I wonder whether your nephew has ever mentioned to you that I was recently left a property called Warlock Hall?”

“I have never heard him speak of it.”

“Oh, well, perhaps he didn’t know. No reason why he should, now I come to think of it. Perhaps, one of these days, I’ll look up this Mr. Aily. What manner of man is he—apart from his elegance and eloquence and his no-doubt worthy ambition to save the rate-payers’ money, I mean? And what of my neighbour Lorrimer?”

“Oh, *he* is fairly young—in his early thirties, I should think—very tall and rather thin. It was owing largely to his representations that Mrs. Dasti obtained her nomination to Lady Matilda’s Rest, or so I heard. He has great influence locally, being a landowner and such a particular friend of Mr. Aily.”

“Oh, indeed? This might indicate that my theory is not so far-fetched, after all.”

“You don’t think Mr. Lorrimer is our tall thin Third Man, do you?” asked Alison, when they were in bed that night.

“I’ve known more unlikely things. His house may be the ‘my place’ referred to on the night the three of them

muscled in to Warlock Hall when I listened to their conversation. Anyway, when I call on him I shall know, because I got a very good look at him, both then, by candle light, and also when we spotted them in their boat off Christchurch."

"Was he at the inquest?"

"Not so far as I know, but I was too much interested in the proceedings to bother about the audience, so he may have been. I should think it unlikely, though. The council had their solicitor present to watch their interests and there was also the town clerk, or someone, who gave evidence. I shouldn't think any members of the council or their close friends would have bothered. All the same, if Lorrimer is my man, I think I would have spotted him more or less automatically, if you know what I mean."

They saw Miss Coningsby-Layton off on the following day immediately after lunch, went for a drive around some of the Cotswold villages, spent a quiet Sunday, and on the Monday Timothy took his wife back to the school. The last thing she said to him before they parted was:

"Don't call on Mr. Lorrimer without me. A man needs his wife on these formal occasions."

"And on all others," said Timothy gallantly. "Look, I can't find it in my heart to ask you never to leave me again in favour of Sabrina and her blasted school, but please don't do it too often."

"I don't suppose I shall ever do it again. *Will* you take me if you go to visit Mr. Lorrimer?"

"Other things being equal . . ."

"Which they never are. All right! Go and vet him on your own! Now, then, what else do I think you might get up to when I'm not here to keep an eye on you?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid your thoughts really do sometimes lie too deep for tears."

"I *did* cry the first night I was away from you at the beginning of the term, if you really want to know."

"Oh, lord! Did you?"

"Yes, but it was all right. I think P.-B. must have guessed, because she put her head in and said, "Whisky, ginger wine, and sherry in the cupboard. Help yourself." So I giggled and helped myself pretty lavishly and that was the end of that."

"Tired Nature's sweet restorer, a nice whisky mac, eh? I'm ashamed of you, really I am. Fancy finding comfort in the bottle while I crept away to my lonely bed unloved, unhonoured, and unsung!"

"And also undrunk, I hope, but never mind that now. Look, you haven't answered my question and I've got to get out of this car in a minute to go and take prep., and as the prep. room is immediately above P.-B.'s sitting-room I'd better get along before the rioting begins."

"Don't tell me that girls throw inky darts and commit general mayhem when the eye of authority is elsewhere."

"No, but they make a good deal of noise. Anyway, now everybody uses ball-point, I shouldn't think even boys throw inky darts any more, do they?"

"Oh, well, there are always pins and penknives, not to mention flickable rulers and the sharp point of a pair of compasses."

"*Our* boys don't go in for that sort of thing, I'm perfectly certain. Gentlemen, one and all."

"God bless your innocent heart! Well, you'd better push off before Ermyintrude snips the elastic of Geraldine's reach-me-downs and a free-for-all ensues."

"They all wear tights, except when it's P.E. or games, and then they wear shorts on a foolproof waistband, so sucks to you, and keep your schoolboy humour to entertain your bird-witted friends."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Ghost Materialises

“Quiet yet; but if ye make
Any noise, they both will wake,
And such spirits raise, ’twill then
Trouble Death to lay agen.”

Upon a Wife That Died Mad With Jealousie

Timothy had a clear idea of what he intended to do. He had obtained from Miss Coningsby-Layton the addresses of the two old almswomen who had given evidence (and the coroner a headache) at the resumed inquest, for Miss Coningsby-Layton had insisted upon being told where all her former flock were billeted and had promised to visit any who expressed a desire to see her again.

Mrs. Plumb had gone, as she had stated, to live with a married daughter in Ipswich. Mrs. Baines, pending her transfer to the new council almshouses which were not completed, was established in a caravan on a site owned by the council near the seaside village of Abbots Greysand, five miles from Warlock Hall as the crow flies, but nearer twenty by road because of the creek and the marshes.

Timothy tossed a coin to decide which of the two old women he should visit first—heads Mrs. Baines, tails Mrs. Plumb. It came down heads and, as he had been brought up never to challenge the result of the toss, he drove from the Cotswolds to Abbots Greysand on the morning following

his parting with Alison, trusting that he would find the old lady at home and that she would be willing to talk to him.

He felt that he had ample excuse for interesting himself in the circumstances of Mrs. Dasti's death because he was determined to find out whether he was right in supposing that it had some connection with the activities of the three men at Warlock Hall. If it had, he thought he would have a case to put before the police. If it had not, the matter, so far as he was concerned, was closed, and the police could be left to solve the mystery of the murder in their own way. Only on one point did he feel doubtful about his theory. He could not decide whether the boat he and Alison had seen off Christchurch could have got back to the creek in time for the men to remove the chimney-pot from one of the almshouse cottages on the following Saturday before they murdered Mrs. Dasti on the Saturday night or in the early hours of the Sunday morning. Questioning the two witnesses he was going to interview would do nothing, he supposed, to solve this problem, but at least there were some things they could tell him.

Mrs. Baines appeared at first to be more than willing to tell him everything he wanted to know, so far as this lay in her power and within the scope of her knowledge. To begin with, having welcomed Timothy and introduced him to another old woman who shared the caravan with her, she repeated almost word for word her opinion of Lady Matilda's Rest, its hospital matron and, above all, her cookery partner, Miss Melsom.

"But I'm shut of her, thank God," she concluded. "They've put her to Kitty's Pity, and serve her right."

"Kitty's Pity?"

"Ah. That's what I calls St. Catherine's Piety, a church place over by Wilmhaven, and a nasty old place that is. Nothing but one big dormitory, that isn't, with a black and red cloak to put on when you goes into the town, and a tall

'at, the like of what witches wears. Give that Lucy Melsom a broomstick and you'd never know the difference."

"Why don't you like her?"

"They only takes virgins there," said Mrs. Baines, not entirely disregarding the question. "What I says is as virgins is an affront unto the law of nature, however pleasin' to the saints above."

"St. Paul in particular, I take it."

"Oh, *him*! Get married if you can't do without. That's what *he* said. When I gets up there I'm a-goin' to ask him one question and one only. 'Then why is it called the 'oly estate?' I'm a-goin' to demand of him. I'm lookin' forward to hearin' what he got to say to that one. What do *you* think?"

"Yes, it should be interesting," Timothy agreed. "So you think he would approve of Miss Coningsby-Layton."

"Miss Coningsby-Layton? Oh, the warden. Mind you, she was an improvement on the other silly bitch we 'ad when first I went there seven years ago. Ah, she was a nasty mess, *she* was, and no mistake. Threatened to report you to the council as soon as look at you, she did, and three reports and you was out, she went and told us. First meetin' we ever 'ad with 'er, that was."

"Good gracious me! Were many turned out during her time?" asked Timothy.

"Nary a one," replied Mrs. Baines, with a horrid chuckle. "Me, I got the girls together and I says, 'Mark my words,' I says, 'she ain't a-going to turn nobody away. 'Cos why?' I says. 'Because, for one thing, it would look as if she was a dead an' gone failure at 'er job,' I says, 'and, for another, the council would 'ave to find somewheres else to put us, and that sort of worry ain't a-going to soften 'em up towards 'er,' I says. Course, there was some as was afraid of their own shadders, like you always find, and they licked 'er boots, the blacklegs!—but the rest of us played merry

'ell. My 'usband 'ad bin a shop stooard in the motors, so I learnt a thing or two, I can tell you."

"So I suppose it was before Miss Coningsby-Layton's time that the back fence got broken down. Was that the result of fair wear and tear, or did it, so to speak, receive assistance?"

"That's tellin', ain't it?" She looked at him craftily. "Look," she said, "how much is it worth to you?"

"Is what worth to me?"

"Oh, come orf it! You knows what I means. First you comes moseyin' about around the garding while your lady wife goes into me cottage with the warden, and then you goes to that inquest on Mattie Dasti, poor old cow, and now you comes 'ere. Oo sent you, and 'ow did you know where I was? I wasn't born yesterday, you know. You're after something, and I know you ain't police, and if you're from the newspapers, well, they pays for information about dirty murderers, don't they?"

"So, I believe, do the police, if the information is worth having, but they have to be quite sure it *is* worth having, you know, Mrs. Baines. All the same, I am not a policeman, as you indicate, and I am not a journalist, and you have already told me what I wanted to know."

Mrs. Baines stared at him for a few moments while she rehearsed her next remarks, and then she treated him to an outburst of profanity so all-inclusive, incisive, and rhetorical that he leaned back in his chair and listened with critical attention not untinged with envy.

"Well," he said, when she seemed to have exhausted herself, "I've heard the cox of my college boat, I've heard the hooker and some prop forwards in the scrum, I've heard cattle-hands and bargees, a costermonger in his cups, a coalman whose mate had dropped a sack of coals on him, and a yachtsman when another bloke cut in and stole his wind, but never in all my puff, Mrs. Baines, have I

listened to such a magnificent outburst as yours. By heaven, I envy you your vocabulary."

"No ill-feelin', sir," she responded, her wrinkled countenance breaking into a most unexpected smile. "I knowed you was a gentleman when you picked up my stitches for me. So you wanted to know all about that broken fence, did you? You got it out of me very clever, I must say. Yes, it was done before the present warden got there, but it took Mattie Dasti to see 'ow the best use could be made of it, and that wasn't until about a year ago when she 'ad the first of her visitors."

"By way of the broken fence?"

"Oh, no, not the first one. He come there right and proper. That old cow I was tellin' you about, she made a rule as we was only to 'ave visitors at certain times, like in an 'orspital, but the new warden made it so anybody could come in any time."

"Did you see him, this first visitor?"

"Oh, yes, a little tiddly pea-jacket sort of feller he was, with a face like a monkey. A seafarin' man, I daresay. Name of Zeekant, which is what I call a funny sort of a name and maybe he never got it from 'is father—if 'e 'ad one."

"A relative of hers?"

"Well, she *said* 'e were 'er nevvie, for what *that's* worth. Anyway, 'e couldn't 'ave been 'er fancy man, not at 'er age. And we never seen 'im again."

"Did he bring anything with him?"

"Ah. 'E brought 'er a big bag o' sweets. She 'anded 'em round, I'll say that much for 'er, but they was mostly stickjaw, so some of us never 'ad none. I reckon she told 'im the kind to bring, so's she wouldn't need to give away too many."

"What sort of bag was it?"

Mrs. Baines stared at him.

"Why, just a bag. What you gettin' at?" she enquired.

"Oh, nothing," said Timothy. "Did she hand the sweets round immediately she got them?"

"No, not 'til the man 'ad gorn. Anyway, I reckon she wanted time to pick out a few for 'erself before she started actin' bountiful."

"How did the man get there?"

"Now 'ow should I know that? Walked over the fields from the town, I reckon."

"Did she ever have any visitors who came by boat?"

"By boat? Not as I ever heard of. Why?"

"I just thought a boat might have saved him the walk, that's all. Sailors aren't usually very keen walkers, I believe."

"I wouldn't know about that."

"But she had other visitors, you think, who got to her back door by way of the broken fence. She left her cottage that way, too. Even Miss Coningsby-Layton suspected that."

"Well, more than Mattie made use of a back way out and in, so there's nothing to that . . . Oh, thank you, I'm sure, sir! You wouldn't have it in silver, would you, sir? There might be questions asked if I went shoppin' with my mate with a pound note in me purse what she knows I do not 'ave . . . Ah, that's better. Yes, sir, a fifty and the rest in smaller is all right, not but what I don't 'ate them nasty clippy bits of fifty things. They ain't genteel, not to my way of thinkin', whereas paper ten bob notes was classy and didn't get mixed up with your two-bob-bits like them nasty cheap little fifties do."

Timothy felt he had gained something from Mrs. Baines, but was unlikely to gain any more unless Mrs. Plumb was able and willing to tell him something with which he could confront Mrs. Baines in order that it might either jog her memory or induce her to disclose facts which, so far, she had kept from him. Certainly the description of Mrs. Dasti's first visitor did not approximate in any way whatever to the appearance of any of his three

suspects, but the fact that Mrs. Baines thought he might be a seafaring man was valuable information and must surely have some bearing on the doings at Warlock Hall.

In the land of creeks and rivers, with the open sea not so very many miles away, a seafaring man visiting the almshouses would have little real significance so far as the inmates were concerned, and they would have had no reason to imagine that the bag of sweets had contained anything else.

It was in no very hopeful spirit that he set off to contact Mrs. Plumb, and on the journey to see her he was in more than half a mind (supposing that she had nothing useful to tell him) to give up his quest for Mrs. Dasti's murderer so long as Warlock Hall ceased to be a rendez-vous for smugglers and a nest for their birds of passage.

Before he could get to Ipswich to see Mrs. Plumb, however, there was a strange little interlude introduced first of all by Alison. The week-end which followed his interview with Mrs. Baines promised to be so fine and warm that when he collected Alison from school on the Friday afternoon she said, "Why shouldn't we go to Herrings for a couple of days and take Tom and Diana? We could all sleep on the boat and go for a trip up and down the river. I'm sure they'd like it."

"All right, if that's what you want," said Timothy. "I suppose I shan't get any peace until you've been to that house of doom again."

"I thought perhaps, when we've seen how the workmen and gardeners are getting on, we might come to a final decision."

"On what?"

"Oh, Tim! Whether we're going to sell, pull down, rebuild, or *what*, of course."

"Yes, I thought that's what you meant."

"Actually, I think you ought to have some consideration for your great-uncle."

“You don’t want to sell or pull down and rebuild?”

“Of course I don’t. Where would the ghost go if we deprived it of its home?”

Timothy thought of the cry he had heard in the minstrels’ gallery, a sound not yet accounted for, and said that he did not know.

Tom Parsons had a weekend free from commitments, so, on the Saturday morning, he and his wife joined Timothy and Alison for an early lunch, left their car in Timothy’s garage, and the four went together in Timothy’s Humber to Warlock Hall.

As the work in the house itself was being carried out by the firm which the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest always employed for its own renovations and reconstructions, a good deal had already been done. The great-uncle’s somewhat squalid quarters had been stripped out and restored to their original form of kitchen and buttery, the screens passage had been re-floored with stone flags, and a second doorway from the screens passage into the great hall—a doorway which had previously been blocked in—had been discovered and restored.

Timothy had consulted with Tom on the subject of the Tudor stair. It was badly placed and communicated on the ground floor with nothing but a cul-de-sac passage whose open end led to what were now the kitchen regions. On the other hand, it was in itself a handsome feature and, apart from discarding it altogether, there seemed little else to do but leave it where it was. It formed a means of reaching the rooms built over the kitchen without using the difficult and narrow newel stair and without traversing the long gallery which was built over the great hall. In the end, they decided to leave it exactly as it was, but to open up the cul-de-sac wall so as to provide another means of access to the gardens which were now taking pleasant shape under expert hands.

Consultations over, the two men went off to look over the boat and run the car, which held sleeping bags and pillows, down to the moorings, while the two women remained up at the Hall. Any question of pulling down and rebuilding had now been settled because of the expensive alterations and improvements which had been or were to be made. The only decision still to come was whether to keep on the house or sell it.

"If only Tim didn't hate the place so much," said Alison, "I wouldn't have a second thought about it. I love our Cotswold home and, anyway, I know he wouldn't give it up, but I'd like to think we could come here for part of each spring or summer. The trouble is that he not only dislikes the Hall—although I think he might be more reconciled to it now that it's coming back to its rightful shape—but he can't see any beauty in this wasteful, watery countryside."

"He may think differently about that now he's got the boat," said Diana. "All the same, I'm not at all sure that I'd want to live here. It's creepy."

"Yes, but that's one of the things I like about it."

"Wouldn't it get on your nerves, though?"

"I don't know. I think I'll suggest that we try it for a time and sell it later if it bores or frightens us."

"You don't think it's haunted, do you?"

"Well, I do hope it is. I'm sure ghosts exist, although I've never seen one."

"I should hate to think it's possible to see one, but I think spookery exists only in the imagination. Anyway, that's quite bad enough. In fact, it's really as bad as the other. My own imagination can frighten me as much as a ghost would."

"When my imagination frightens me it's only when I think of anything happening to Tim. Sometimes I lie awake at night imagining all sorts of horrors. It's silly and unnecessary, I know, but—well, there it is, and I can't always cope with it. Let's go up to the attic floor and see

what can be done with the rooms up there. Tim says they are all connected, which is going to make complications if we ever want to use them as guest rooms.”

“The very old or the very young—those who go to bed early—would have to be given the one furthest through, and arrangements made to suit the others. Oh, and what about bathrooms? I don’t seem to remember any on the other floors.”

“I’d thought of that. The rooms above the buttery and kitchens will have to be turned into bathrooms and the so-called ‘usual offices,’ and the same could apply on the attic floor, I suppose, so that problem can be disposed of pretty easily, I hope.”

They ascended the Tudor stair and found themselves stymied. As Timothy earlier had discovered, there was no way up from the landing to the floor above.

“Well, there *must* be a way up, because Tim got there,” said Alison. “I believe he said something about the screens passage. Let’s explore.”

Arrangements for meals had been simple. From shops which catered for the many pleasure craft to be found at the up-river moorings, Tom and Timothy were to purchase bread, eggs, bacon, butter, and marmalade for Sunday’s breakfast. Tea and coffee were already on board and Saturday dinner and Sunday lunch would be taken in Cambridge or Ipswich.

“We don’t want to cruise all day,” Timothy had said. “Breakfast on board, a morning trip up-river, lunch at a pub, an afternoon cruise down-river back to moorings at about five, then homeward bound, stopping for dinner and the night in Bedford. From there, Tom and Diana make tracks for Shrewsbury as soon as we’ve had lunch, and I push Alison back to school.”

The two men took a couple of hours to carry out the first part of the programme. The shopping was soon done, for there were supplies of all kinds to be had near the up-river moorings where the cruiser was berthed, but, once on board, they loitered, gossiped, inspected the boat, had a drink, and at last returned to the Hall. They had left two women there. They came back to find three.

"This is Grete," said Alison in a casual tone. "Are we going along to the boat now? Did you manage to get all the things I put down on the list? If so, we might as well be going, mightn't we? Grete, this is my husband and this is Mr. Parsons.

Timothy greeted the girl in the accepted way. Tom Parsons did the same. She was a tall, strong, angular young person who spoke with a marked German accent and confided to them that her surname was Bismarck—"but ze *von* I do not have," she added, showing her large teeth in a mirthless smile.

"Grete is joining us for the week-end," said Alison airily. "I suppose we can squeeze her in, can't we?"

"Surely," Timothy replied. "The boat sleeps six, although the berths in the nose are a bit on the short side," he added, looking at Grete, who was almost as tall as himself. "Well, if we're all set, let's get weaving. Can you three manage on the back seat of the car if Tom and I sit in front?"

"Far be it from me to display any ornery curiosity," said Timothy in a guarded voice, when he and Alison were in their bunks in the saloon that night, "but how come you dug up Grete?"

"Oh, Tim, I think she's our ghost."

"A substantial one, if so."

"She smuggled herself out of East Germany."

"With no passport and no papers, one presumes."

"I didn't ask. Diana and I found her in the attics. I don't know the whole story, but it seems that she managed to get into West Germany and from there a Dutch sea-captain got her on to his boat and she came over disguised as one of the deck-hands."

"Just like that! Well, what do you know? And what are we supposed to do about her when this week-end is over?"

"Take her on as an au pair, of course. What else?"

"God bless you, darling, because I shan't!"

"She's had a pretty rotten time, I expect. Anyway, when she comes back home with us you can question her and find what it's all about. You're not annoyed about her, are you?"

"It seems to me that she's an illegal immigrant. Do you want to get me quodded?"

"Darling, who's to know anything about it? Tom and Diana won't talk, and the Gees have gone. There's nothing to worry about."

"Sez you! Oh, well, it's all settled for this week-end, I suppose. How did you come to light on this female Bismarck?"

"Oh, quite by accident, of course. We wanted to explore the attics and had quite a lot of fun looking for the way up, but we found it at last. Apparently Grete has been spending her time dodging Mrs. Gee during cleaning times, and sleeping rough in the attics."

"Sleeping rough? Not if she parked herself on an almost new divan up there. How has she managed for food?"

"I have no idea. That's one of the things you can ask her when we get back. She certainly made a hearty supper tonight, didn't she?"

"Just like a starving wolf. Of course, she has a very big frame. Oh, well, I'll sleep on it. I'm not going to let her spoil the week-end, especially as she did all the washing up. Night-night. Don't stay awake brooding upon your sins. It'll

take too long, and I want you fresh and lively in the morning."

The morning and, indeed, the whole of Saturday and Sunday, did much to mollify Timothy. Grete was willing, it seemed, to undertake all the chores, including cooking the breakfasts and producing snacks at bedtime. She had nothing to say unless she was addressed, but when she did speak it was in careful and grammatical English, although still with a marked German accent. By the time the parties separated nobody knew any more about her than had been known at the beginning, but Timothy thought he had found a solution of his chief difficulty, which was what to do with the girl when the week-end was over.

"Look here," he said to Alison on the Monday morning, when he was due to drive her to the school, "I'm hanged if I want Grete as a member of the household. We don't need an au pair, and Mrs. Nealons won't want her hanging about in the kitchen. Do you think we can wish her on Sabrina? There must be some job she could do in a boarding school. Hang it all, Sabrina owes me something after pinching my wife for three months. What do you think?"

"How do we explain Grete's apparent statelessness though?"

"We don't. We put on a face of brass and don't explain anything. Never explain, never accept responsibility, never complain, and, above all, never apologise. These are the basic rules of the Good Life."

"I'm glad you told me. Well, you seem to get away with most things where P.-B. is concerned, so you may very well get away with fobbing off Grete on to her. You can but try."

"Well, look you now, who discovered this Bismarck wench and took it on herself to befriend her? I suppose hers were the cries which caused me to conclude that Warlock Hall was haunted. I can't wait to hear the whole story. Have you told me all you know?"

"These doubts do not become you. I *have* told you all I know. It's simple enough, isn't it?"

"Not how she's managed to exist all this time without visible means of subsistence."

"I think that is fairly obvious. She's stolen food from Mrs. Gee's larder and swiped biscuits and things which I'm sure Mrs. Gee must have kept up at the Hall for her own elevenses."

"No wonder Mrs. Gee thought the house was haunted!"

"I expect she thought it was Jabez who made inroads on her food stocks. You know what men are, when there's anything to eat around the house."

"Well, really! That cap certainly doesn't fit *me*!"

"And another thing. The house is now *officially* named Herrings. Diana and I christened it this afternoon."

"Bismarck Grete and Warlock Herrings! Charming! All right, you win. Herrings it is, but Bismarck Herrings is how I shall always think of it in future."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Plumb Line

“Fresh strowings allow
To my Sepulcher now,
To make my lodgings the sweeter;
A staffe or a wand
Put then in my hand,
With a pennie to pay S. Peter.”

The Peter-Penny

Not only was the ghost of Herrings exorcised, but its gift of the match-box was explained. Believing that the appearance of the vestas on Timothy's bedside table would cause the box to be carefully examined, Grete explained that she had written on the inside flap (which, in a box of the kind, was to protect the matches from spilling out when the box was opened) the message: *Please help me*. This Timothy had never noticed, and the box was where he had left it under his pillow, since they had not used the bed again. Miss Pomfret-Brown received the addition to her household in characteristic fashion.

“So you fling me your discards,” she said to Timothy.

“I lay upon you the burden which is too heavy for me, ma'am,” he replied, with a bow.

“To perdition with your damned quotations! What am I expected to do with the gal?”

“Perhaps,” said Timothy meekly, “she could groom, feed, and exercise her compatriot.” He indicated Miss

Pomfret-Brown's miniature dachshund which had selected, as usual, the most comfortable of the armchairs in his owner's sanctum and was curled up in it like a cross between a seal-pup and a baby fox, his silken black coat indicative of the one, and his long muzzle, with its beautiful light tan markings, the other.

"Oh, there's always a Junior School waitin'-list to groom and feed Bismarck and take 'im out," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Tell Alison to find out whether the gal's German is grammatical."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Teachin', of course. If we're goin' into Europe, as I suppose we shall, sooner or later, fools that we are, the more French and German we all know the less we shall be taken for a ride. Oh, and the gal will be known simply as Fraulein. Can't have two blisterin' Bismarcks on the strength."

"Sabrina, you are a life-line and a darling. I foresee that you will be a great woman in history."

"That's two quotes you've bowdlerised in less than five minutes. Go and fetch the gal and let me terrify 'er into submission. D'yer recognise *that* one?"

"Peachum, John Gay. You'll never catch me out on *The Beggar's Opera*. I ought to impress upon you that she hasn't any papers. To all intents and purposes she's an illegal immigrant."

"It'll sort itself out. Things always do, if you don't fuss and bother. Time ain't only the great healer; it's also the great simplifier. Never do anything you don't want to, because Time will do it for you. Lived on that basis ever since I was about eleven. Saves wear and tear on the system. Think I could have run a boarding-school for all these hussies all these years if I'd ever fretted? Should have been in me grave long ago if I had. Now say good-bye to Alison and be orf with you, but first send me this poltergeist. I have a fair smatterin' of the Teutonic and will

soon sort the wench out. How did she get to that outlandish house of yours in the first place?"

"I understand that a Dutch captain took pity on her and pushed her aboard his boat, probably, I think, with a lot of Pakistanis he was bringing over. He didn't charge her anything, either. She's very grateful to him."

"So she's no better than she should be! Oh well, in that case, she'll feel quite at home with me upper fifth."

Grete having been disposed of in this convenient if unconventional way, Timothy drove back to his home and on the following morning went off to interview Mrs. Plumb. In coming to a decision to talk to her about the death of Mrs. Dasti he was actuated chiefly by curiosity. The coroner had refused to allow her to continue with what she seemed to regard as evidence which might be valuable, and Timothy, bored and somewhat at a loose end without Alison, felt a lively curiosity about what the old woman had been prevented from saying at the inquest. He still hoped, too, that she could supplement what he had already learnt from Mrs. Baines.

He had the address which Mrs. Plumb had given in court, and had very little trouble in finding the house. It was on a council estate, an exact replica of dozens of its neighbouring dwellings, and was indistinguishable from them except for the number on the door and the curtains at the front windows.

The door-knocker attached to the letterbox was polished, the door-sill freshly cleaned, and when the door was opened by a girl of about nineteen the only smell which Timothy could detect was that of floor-polish.

"Yes?" enquired the girl. She was wearing an open housecoat over Bermuda shorts, was beautifully made up in the discreet modern manner and her waist-long hair was shining and was parted in the middle to flow freely down on either side of a broad and good-humoured face.

"I am enquiring for a Mrs. Plumb," said Timothy.

"Are you from the insurance?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I've come in connection with Lady Matilda's Rest."

"Oh, I see. What about it?"

"If I might have a word with Mrs. Plumb?"

"You can't 'ave that there 'ere," said the girl pertly.

"Gone out, has she? That's a blow," said Timothy.

"Could I call back later?"

"Suit yourself, but it won't do you no good, and if it's anything to do with them almshouses, nobody wants to know."

"Not even if it's something to her advantage?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well," said Timothy, improvising hastily, "there is a small bonus payable to those who were in residence when Lady Matilda's Rest was condemned."

"She's gorn for a cheap afternoon at the pictures, I shouldn't wonder."

"Oh, really? Well, suppose I call back in a couple of hours? She'll be back by then, I take it?"

"Couldn't say, I'm sure."

"Oh, well, I'll chance it. I'm particularly anxious to see her."

"I reckon she'll be glad to see you, too, if there's money in it."

"Well, only a very little, I'm afraid."

"Anyway, come on in, if you like. Me 'usband and dad are at work, and me mum's round me auntie's, so I can do with a bit of company."

"I don't think so. Look, I expect I'm old enough to be your father . . ."

"Go on with you! I'm seventeen!"

"Even so, I could just about have managed it, I think, so a word of advice from me should not be taken amiss. You are alone in this house, you say?"

“What of it? My neighbour’s in. She’d soon come if I screamed.” She looked invitingly at him.

“I’m relieved to hear it. Well, good-bye for the present,” said Timothy.

“You could save yourself the trouble of coming back if you just left the bonus, whatever it is, couldn’t you? I mean, I’d see Auntie got it,” said the girl.

“Of course you would, but I’m afraid I have to get her signature when I hand over the money. I have to account for it, you see.”

“Wouldn’t me signing the paper do all right? Come on in and witness me write me name.”

“I fear not.” He raised his hat. The girl held the door open until he had shut the small front gate behind him, and then she suddenly called out,

“Hi, mister! Just a minute!”

Timothy opened the gate and went back to her.

“Yes?” he said.

“What advice was you going to give me?”

“Not to invite strange men into the house when you’re alone, that’s all. Screaming might come a bit late in the day, you know, especially if your neighbour didn’t have a key to your front door.”

The girl grinned.

“Thanks for nothing!” she said. “I learns judo. I know how to take care of myself.”

“I don’t propose to suggest a demonstration here and now,” said Timothy, “but I wouldn’t mind betting that there are forms of thuggery against which judo would be of little use.”

This time she allowed him to go, and he left his car outside the house and walked aimlessly at first until he found himself in the oldest part of the town. Here he was in his element, so much so that for the next couple of hours he completely forgot his errand. He went into St. Margaret’s Church to admire the hammerbeam roof, and

into St. Peter's to look at the black marble Tournai font made in the twelfth century. He saw Wolsey's gate, the outside of Sparrowe's House, and spent over an hour in the beautiful mid-sixteenth-century Christchurch Mansion, used as a museum and built on the site of an Augustinian Priory. It was not until he looked at his watch and saw that the time was a quarter to six that he remembered his reason for coming to Ipswich and picked up a taxi.

His arrival corresponded with that of a police car. He paid off his taxi and waited until the policeman had gone before he knocked at the door. As he walked up the path he had noticed the curtains drawn aside at neighbouring houses to watch his arrival, and felt little doubt that the people across the way had been equally curious about the arrival of a police car.

The same girl opened the door, but this time her face was pale and her eyes were wide with shock and fright. Timothy raised his hat and enquired whether Mrs. Plumb had arrived home from the cinema.

"No, nor ever likely to," said the girl. "Didn't you see that policeman? Auntie got stabbed in the cinema. He come to tell us."

"I'm terribly sorry. Is she badly hurt?"

"She's dead. So, if you've got her bonus on you, it'll come in handy for the funeral." She made this remark on a repressed sob which gave the lie to the callous words.

"In that case . . ."

"Oh, yes, you can come on in. My mother and dad are at home." She held the door wide open and followed him into the passage, closing the front door with a bang when they were both inside. "In here," she said, opening the door to the sitting-room. "I'll fetch my dad." She was gone for nearly five minutes and then returned with a middle-aged man wearing workman's overalls, for which he apologised.

"Only just got home, sir. My daughter tells me you come to ask about poor Auntie. Well, I'm afraid it's no go,

sir. We just had word . . .”

“Yes, I know,” said Timothy. “I’m dreadfully sorry. I came to see her in connection with her residence at the almshouses.”

“I wouldn’t know nothing about that, sir. The wife used to visit her now and then, but I never went, her being no relation of mine, as you might say, and a sharp-spoken old body into the bargain, not as I wish to say nothing again her now. Of course, she wasn’t livin’ here with us. My married daughter and ’er ’usband is our lodgers. All the same, we’re terrible shocked, of course. These dead-beats and ’ooligans will do anything nowadays for kicks. I don’t suppose they meant to kill ’er, but there you are, and, between you and me, sir, barrin’ the womenfolk (what are bound to take on a bit, if only for the look of the thing), nobody ain’t going to mourn for the poor old girl. We ’ad ’er ’ere for a bit, but ’er nasty ungrateful old tongue and all ’er grumbling fair got me down, I’m tellin’ you. Anyway, apart from needin’ the room for my daughter, who’s just got married, ’ave the wife’s auntie ’ere for good and all I couldn’t and shouldn’t, and so I’m telling you.”

“Yes, I remember her as a rather forthright old lady. I didn’t realise she had changed her address. This was the one she gave at the inquest. My business with your aunt was rather important, so I wonder, if she isn’t too much upset, whether I might have a word with your wife?”

The woman appeared to be no more distressed than her husband, although she admitted that the news of her aunt’s death and the appearance of the police had been a shock. Timothy sympathised.

“I wondered,” he said, “whether your aunt might have told you anything about the circumstances of her being compelled to leave Lady Matilda’s Rest?”

“They all had to leave. It wasn’t only the wife’s auntie,” said the man.

"Yes, I know. The almshouses were condemned as being unsafe after a Mrs. Dasti was killed there."

"You surely don't think Auntie was killed because she *knew* something about that, do you, sir?" It was the wife who spoke. Interested that she should have jumped to this conclusion, Timothy said:

"I've no idea. *Did* she know something?"

"Nothing important, I'm sure, sir. She threw out some hints as how Mrs. Dasti used to have some funny visitors over the back fence at nights, and as how Auntie reckoned they left her with something to sell in the town, because Auntie spotted 'er talkin' to some woman in the market and things changin' hands, but there wasn't anything definite."

"She used to grumble to us as how the coroner wouldn't let 'er tell nothin' about it, but, to my mind, she 'adn't got nothing to tell. As I see it, and as I knew 'er, she was just a nosey-parkerin' old busybody," said the man, "not as I would demean myself to speak ill of the dead. Poor Auntie's gone where she'll never vent 'er spite on nobody no more. All the same, between you and me and the gate-post, it were only for Mother's sake—my missus, you know—as I ever give my consent to 'avin' 'er 'ere at all, and soon's we got the excuse of our Ethel and 'er Bert wantin' the room, well, I couldn't get the old termagant out quick enough, and that's the truth of it. And 'ow 'er other niece 'as put up with 'er, even these few weeks, I 'ardly likes to arst, and we ain't bin round there since we got rid of 'er on to 'em, not wantin' no family upsets. Do you know, sir, until we got rid of 'er I nearly slung me 'ook back to 'Oxton, where I belongs. Either that, or crahn the old such-and-such, I thinks to meself. Still, I wouldn't want 'er dead, not in such a way as this, no'ow."

Timothy did not think it was possible, under the circumstances, to trouble the other relatives. He did not even ask for their address.

"I've been carrying coals to Newcastle," said Timothy, as he drove Alison home on the following Friday afternoon. "The police had been keeping an eye on Mrs. Plumb. They seem to have taken even more notice of her statement (and her attempt at a further statement) than the coroner did, but they were caught napping when she went to the cinema. She was sitting in the back row downstairs and all the murderer had to do was to lean over and stick her. At that time in the afternoon the place was full of old age pensioners, and nobody seems to have taken a blind bit of notice until somebody, squeezing past her, pushed against her and she just keeled over. They thought at first she was ill and an usherette and the manager got her out to the vestibule before they spotted the knife."

"How absolutely beastly!"

"Yes. Anyway, it's right out of my hands now. As soon as I recalled to the police what she had said at the inquest, they said they knew all about it and more or less told me to quit meddling. At that, I suggested that they should come over to Warlock—to Herrings—to find out whether the palliasses had been replaced. They were polite but sceptical, and proved justified in their attitude. There wasn't a hair or a hide of anything to suggest illegal immigrants, and nothing to show that a boat had ever used the broken jetty. I'm afraid they regard me as a crank and a busybody, and that's all I get for trying to do my duty as an honest and upright citizen."

"Well, Herrings has one thing in its favour. P.-B. approves of Grete's teaching of German and is now pulling strings to get her political asylum over here. Grete has come across with her whole story and, so far as it can be checked, it seems to be the truth. She'd fallen foul of the Communists and had to get out. In West Germany she met this Dutch sea-captain. He seems to have fallen for her, they had an affair, I gather, and as he wanted to see more of her and has a wife in Holland, he smuggled Grete across

to England, kept her hidden on his boat (while the Pakistanis were taken to Herrings, I suppose), and then saw nothing for it but to hide her up at the Hall after Jabez and the others had cleared off on another excursion."

"Sounds credible, I suppose, but what did he intend to do with her after that?"

"She doesn't know. She never saw him again."

"The dirty fellow! How long was she up at the Hall, then?"

"Only a matter of weeks, it seems, and frightened to death all the time in case the men or Mrs. Gee found her."

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Gee. I suppose she was cognisant of the fact that Herrings was being used as a dumping ground for illegal immigrants?"

"Oh, she must have been. For one thing, I expect she was responsible for feeding them while they were there. I think her departure was expedited not so much by the advent of our workmen as because she realised the game was up, so far as using Herrings as a base was concerned."

"You know, those men were up to something far more serious than introducing illegal immigrants into the country. I think dope, as well as Pakistanis, came over from Germany or wherever it was."

"Brought by the Pakistanis?"

"Oh, no. I think *their* only aim and object was to get into the country. The dope was something quite other. It seems to me that the ship brought it over with the Pakistanis, but without their knowledge, and that Mrs. Dasti peddled it on certain Saturdays in Horsebridge while apparently engaged with her shopping. Mrs. Plumb let it out that she had followed her one Saturday, and, finding that, if the coroner wasn't interested in this dangerous statement, the police were, the murderous devils of smugglers did for her at the very first opportunity they had presented to them."

"But how could they be sure that she hadn't already told the police all she knew?"

"I suppose because the police, so far, had only kept an eye on her. They hadn't actually contacted her. Too busy looking about them to trace the dope, which they must have guessed at, same as I have done, I suppose."

"Do you think—I mean, you don't think, do you, that . . ."

"Yes, I do think so. I think somebody who was also keeping an eye on her spotted my car outside that house in Ipswich and recognised it."

"That could only be Jabez or Mrs. Gee."

"Or anybody else to whom Jabez had given a description of the car and its number, of course."

"Then they would have seen you go back to that house after Mrs. Plumb had been murdered!"

"Yes, that's on the cards, of course. Mrs. Plumb wasn't living there, though."

"But, Tim, it could mean that you're no safer than Mrs. Plumb was! After all, she did live there for a week or so! Didn't you say that was the address she gave at the inquest?"

"Not to panic, darling girl. If a murderer has been keeping tabs on me, he already knows that I've been to the police and must have spilled my little bag of beans."

"There's such a thing as revenge, and they stop at nothing nowadays," said Alison, white-faced.

"For which reason, as I am a man of foresight and inexpressible caution, when we get to Stroud this time, you are jolly well going to stay in the Cotswolds with me, and that means you will not be going back to the school. I shall keep you under my eye and the police are prepared to be our guardian angels until all this wretched business has been cleared up. Nobody's going to hurt *me*, but I don't want you kidnapped and held to ransom or something."

“Oh, don’t be silly! Nobody is going to pick on *me*! Of course I shall go back to school. Whatever next?”

“I’ve told you. I don’t often lay down the law about your comings and goings, but I’ve made up my mind about this, and it’s final.”

Alison glanced at his profile, but it told her nothing at all.

“I *am* going back, you know,” she said, a shade of irresolution in her tone. “I shall be perfectly safe at school.”

“My adored Sabrina doesn’t think so. All arrangements have been made to take care of your classes, and she says that if you dare to darken her doors on Monday afternoon, with or without police protection, she’ll take a stick to you. *Now* will you do as you’re told!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Suspicious and an Invitation

“Put in Feare, and hope, and doubt;
What comes in, runnes quickly out;
Put in secrecies withall,
Whatare enters, out it shall.”

Upon Himselfe

“I suppose you know I hate you,” said Alison in bed on the Sunday night.

“Alas, yes, although I can’t think why.”

“You’re a blackmailer.”

“Harsh words.”

“And a busybody.”

“You must have been in correspondence with the police. That’s what *they* think.”

“I want to go back to school tomorrow.”

“And I don’t want you to. Can it be that an irresistible force has met an immovable mass?”

“You’re an arrogant pig!”

“Now, now!”

“Well, you are, and I wouldn’t take the slightest notice of you if you hadn’t got P.-B. to back you up.”

“You wouldn’t worry if I woke screaming in the night wondering what might be happening to you? This gang have already murdered *two* women, you know.”

“Oh, all *right!*” said Alison crossly. “Have it your own way! I suppose you will, whether I say so or not.”

"Too true. Can't we be friends? As a matter of fact—and I confess it with shame—I can't do without you any longer. I don't believe for an instant that any danger threatens either of us . . ."

"Liar!"

"Come, come!"

"Well, you are! Why is that policeman here on guard if there's no danger?"

"May I continue? I can't do without you any longer. As for the policeman, he's here as a precautionary measure, and that's all." He gathered her up. "Come on, be good. I'm sorry for my arbitrary actions, but being bossy comes naturally to me and you knew that before we were married. Besides, we may be in for something interesting. I've had a letter from a neighbour of ours at Herrings."

"When did it come?"

"On Friday, before I went along to collect you."

"What does it say?"

"It's an invitation to a cocktail party. It comes from a chap called Lorrimer who lives at a house called Lorrimer Court. I've looked it up. It's marked on the map and I think it must be that Georgian house I told you about which stands near the mouth of the creek."

"The one with its own landing-stage?"

"That's the one."

"Tim, I've just thought. What about Grete?"

"She isn't invited, so far as I know."

"Don't be silly. I mean, if you don't think I'd be safe at school—I don't believe a word of this 'can't-do-without-me' stuff, because you've just made that up to soft-soap me . . ."

"You wound my loving heart."

"Be quiet! If I wouldn't be safe, why should *she* be? If she's been hiding at Herrings all these weeks, she must have overheard some secrets."

"Yes, well, we'll hope that nobody knows she was there except us. She'll be safe enough. Sabrina will keep an eye on her, and when it all comes out the police will protect her if necessary. Anyway, she isn't my pigeon, but you are, and, anyway I don't want to go alone to this cocktail party. I can and will have my hand held."

"Why do you want to go? It isn't like you to be so eager to plunge into the social whirl, especially cocktail parties, which you've always said you loathed."

"I wondered whether, living so near, this Lorrimer fellow might know something of the comings and goings up and down the creek and the river."

"And if he does?"

"Then, in my cagey way, I shall persuade him to loosen up. Then I can act upon the information, if necessary."

"After drinking his gin?"

"Good lord, you don't suspect *him* of being mixed up in the smuggling racket, do you—a gentlemanly local landowner?"

"Stranger things have happened. I don't want to go to his party and you can't make me. You *are* cagey, and I know jolly well there's something up your sleeve."

"I wouldn't dream of trying to force you to go to a social gathering you did not wish to attend. All right, you go back to school, if that's what you want."

"It isn't. I'm sick of school."

"Nobly spoken. So I won't go to the cocktail party, either. How's that for a bit of marital reciprocation?"

"Fine. We'll get up ever so late tomorrow morning and have breakfast at twelve and lunch at four and tea at seven and dinner at ten."

"What devils we are! Sleep tight."

"Tim!" said Alison, about half an hour later, knowing that he was still awake.

"What now?" he asked. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"I've been thinking about Grete."

"Strangely enough, so have I."

"Do you really think she could have been hidden away in that house for all that time without the Gees knowing anything about it?"

"You and I must be telepathic. I've been having the same idea."

"So that means you don't think she could, and neither do I."

"We talked about her stealing food and its being put down to Jabez raiding his mother's larder, but, for a lot of the time Jabez wasn't even there, and Grete—"

"Would still have had to find something to eat. Surely the Gees must have known she was there, and if so . . ."

"Are you still surprised I've taken you away from the school?"

"Why didn't you tell me you suspected Grete?"

"Because I thought you'd swallowed her story and wanted to believe in her innocence and help her."

"Well, I did at first, but the more I keep thinking it over, the more unlikely it seems that she's a genuine refugee. For one thing, if what she says is true, why, having crossed the border, didn't she stay in West Germany? Why all this elaborate business of getting herself smuggled away on a ship leaving from Holland?"

"It was a Dutch ship, but it probably left from West Germany. We mustn't lose sight of the fact that her story *may* be true, of course. She may have had very good reasons for coming to England. Perhaps the Dutch boyfriend insisted on it, as he was bound for our shores."

"Oh, of course. I suppose you didn't happen to put that match-box in your pocket?"

"No, I can't be bothered with matches as a general rule. Besides, I shoved it underneath my pillow that morning and forgot all about it later on. What about it, anyway?"

“Grete said she wrote a call for help on it. I wonder whether it’s still there under the pillow?”

“Hardly. Mrs. Gee is certain to have made the bed, and that means she must have found it.”

“I’m not so sure that she *would* have made the bed. I remember that you, with your tidy, masculine, unhygienic habits, pulled the covers straight, plumped up the top pillows, and neatly covered it all up with the embroidered counterpane before we left.”

“Yes, but Mrs. Gee knew we’d slept in it. She’d be certain to make it properly after we’d gone.”

“My poor innocent, nobody re-makes a bed, once it appears to be made up, unless they want to change the sheets. Mrs. Gee, knowing we’d only slept in it one night and might be popping in again at any old time, would never have dreamed of changing the sheets. As it happens, we’ve never slept there again. Oh, dear! I suppose somebody else might have done, though. Grete herself, perhaps.”

“To satisfy ourselves, then, we’ll go along and take a look. Anyway, I imagine the newish divan bed in the attics was Grete’s sybaritic couch.”

“I don’t suppose it will lead to anything, but I’d like to clear it up—the match-box business, I mean.”

“Me, too. I remember now that the fat bloke, your Macbeth, wanted to kip down in that room, but the others wouldn’t let him. I stretched myself out on it when I was there alone, of course, but I didn’t undress, so I didn’t get between the sheets and I certainly didn’t think about the box of matches. We’ll go there tomorrow. Meanwhile, that being settled, let us seek the baiting-place of wit, the balm of woe, the poor man’s wealth, the prisoner’s release, the indifferent judge between the high and low, and, in other and lesser words, go to byebyes.”

“Macbeth doth murder sleep. I wonder how much of a villain that man really is?”

“You’re not to think about murder. Don’t—it’s the wrong time of night. Besides, I fancy Jabez Gee is the strong-arm man of that particular outfit. I can’t see Macbeth as a murderer.”

“Jabez Gee may not be too particular about what he does, but I doubt whether he organised that business of the broken chimney-pot. Not that it was a very brainy idea, as it turned out.”

“That’s what someone else said. Coningsby I think it was.”

“When did you first suspect Grete of being one of the gang?” asked Alison, on the way to Herrings on the following morning.

“Oh, fairly early on, I think. If she had been what she pretends, I don’t see why she didn’t make direct contact with us the night we slept there, instead of leaving the box of matches on my bedside table. That’s another thing: we must have a go at finding that secret stair, or whatever it is. There must be one, or how did she get into the state bedroom?”

“I thought you were leaving the problem to the surveyor.”

“Not any longer. If there is a means of access to that room by some way other than the obvious door, I don’t want to lose any time finding it.”

“It can’t matter much, now that she’s left the house. Meanwhile is there anything else about Grete! I mean, I think, after all, that I can quite understand why she didn’t make contact with us that first time. She would have been cautious, naturally, because she wouldn’t have had a clue about us, would she?”

“No, but, against that, I’ve been to the house several times on my own, and she must have realised that I had no connection with those men. She may even have realised

that I was the new owner, and that I'm utterly harmless, yet she waited until you and Diana were alone in the house, and the Gees, mother and son, had both hopped off and left the place, before she made any move. Where exactly did you find her?"

"I thought I told you. We found her when we went up to the attic floor."

"Whereabouts?"

"In the end room of all. You have to go through all the other rooms to get to it."

"Yes, I know. She also haunted the musicians' gallery, and that must have been to keep in touch with Mrs. Gee, I think, by way of the old air-raid shelter. Did you winkle her out, so to speak, or did she manifest herself?"

"We heard her singing. I thought it must be Mrs. Gee come back, but when we went into the end room, Grete was standing there. She said she was glad to see us. I thought nothing more of it than that at the time, although Diana was a bit taken aback. I only thought that it was all rather interesting, and it did seem to explain the ghost. Grete asked whether Mrs. Gee was anywhere about, and when I explained that I thought she had gone for good, Grete seemed much relieved and insisted on making us a cup of coffee—our coffee, needless to say."

"Of course she knew very well that the Gees had gone. That's why she was so anxious to contact you. She knew that the Hall had blown a fuse so far as the smuggling was concerned, and I suppose she was getting to the end of her resources with regard to food. She would hardly have risked going shopping, and maybe she hadn't any money, at that."

"Wouldn't the men have felt bound to find some way of keeping her supplied, if she was really their accomplice?"

"Why should they? I've no doubt they concluded that, once the Hall couldn't be of any more use to them, the best policy was to ditch the girl. You know, darling—not that I

want to start any arguments—I do wish you’d agree to accept Lorrimer’s invitation. I begin to think I’d very much like to go, although I told you I’d scrub it.”

“The cocktail party? Oh, well, all right, if you really want to, we’ll go.”

“And no more worry about school?”

“I should never have given in to P.-B. in the first place. Besides, you always get into trouble when I’m not there to keep tabs on you, and it was you who started all this about the smuggling.”

“I know I did, but please stop and consider: if you’d never taken Lady Macbeth upon you—which is where it all began—we might never have connected Macbeth with this smuggling racket.”

“I’m very sorry we ever did.”

“Oh, come, now! What would life be without a spice of adventure?”

“Quieter, even if less interesting. I wish I knew why you want to go to this wretched cocktail party.”

“That’s an easy one. I want to know whether Lorrimer is our mysterious third man. Adding together all that we know, I really think he must be. He fits the round hole much too easily for it to be otherwise. The only thing is that I wonder whether he isn’t perhaps rather a square peg.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know, except that he didn’t seem a bad sort of chap.”

“Apart from spotting him through binoculars at Christchurch, you’ve only seen him by candlelight.”

“And heard him, don’t forget, and dotted him one—or tried to. He was the only one of the three who wasn’t dead scared that night when he found that there was somebody else in the house besides themselves. I’ll tell you another thing, too: I don’t believe Macbeth got his face smashed up just because they collided. I think he got a nose-bleed when that happened, but I also think this third fellow—

Lorrimere, if my hunch is right—caught up with him and belted him, and that's why he couldn't appear in the play. That fellow in the dressing room seemed pretty sure there had been a fight."

"But why would they fight? When rogues fall out . . ."

"I know all that, and there's no doubt that, if there *was* a disagreement, it's all patched up again. I can think of one reason why they might have fallen out, but it depends upon a rather far-fetched idea."

"Tell me. Your ideas are never too far-fetched for me. I always think you had one of them when you proposed we should get married."

"That wasn't a far-fetched idea. That was sheer inspiration. I considered you 'the loveliest and best that Time and Fate of all their vintage prest.'"

"Don't quote from the *Rubáiyát*. It's unlucky."

"No, it's quoting from *Macbeth* that's unlucky, and even then, only in the dressing-room, I believe. So the cocktail party is on, is it? I'm very grateful to you."

"As that remark doesn't sound ironical, I know there's something you haven't told me."

"Yes, there is, but I wonder whether you'll be even sweeter than usual, and not press me to tell you what it is."

"These snide compliments will not help your case, but women, too, can be gentlemanly at times, so I will muzzle my curiosity. To change the subject entirely, you *do* agree that we call the house Herrings, don't you? Officially, I mean, not just between ourselves."

"I must have a board put up."

"You haven't told me yet when this cocktail party is to be. I'll have to look out something to wear."

"On Tuesday, with apologies for short notice."

"I don't think we're being ethical in going to it, but I said I wouldn't badger you, and I won't."

"We don't know about Lorrimere yet. All's fair in love and war, and if Lorrimere *is* the fellow I think he is, then it's

war all right and, on my side, no holds barred. I'm certain there's some connection with Lady Matilda's Rest, and I don't approve of the murder of old age pensioners . . ."

"Senior citizens, darling."

". . . because I hope to join their ranks one of these fine days if the end of the world doesn't come before I chalk up my three score years and ten. Wouldn't it be exasperating if it did? Fancy paying the government all that money for all those years, only to have the Recording Angel come in and scoop the pool! I *should* be cross!"

"He wouldn't scoop the pool. He'd merely declare a rescission, I think."

"Eh? Come again, please."

"To declare a rescission is to terminate a contract by cancelling it. It's a legal term. Didn't you know? Fancy my being one jump ahead of you at last!"

"I have never had any *need* to know what rescission means. Note the supreme self-satisfaction with which I utter those imperishable words. Nevertheless, for your information, honoured madam, I don't believe that in the case under advisement and/or consideration, rescission would be a possible solution."

"Why not? It repudiates the original contract."

"Granted, but (a) I'm sure that, in law, I should be held to have affirmed the contract, as I should have paid my contributions to the State pension up to the time of the Last Trump, and (b) as the Recording Angel would argue, no doubt, once the bugle had been blown I could not possibly be restored to my original position, and so no rescission would be operable, and (c) if third party rights have accrued—and this means *you*—rescission cannot be obtained. I submit, therefore, that I should lose my money. Members of the jury, what is your verdict?"

"Oh, damn you!" said Alison, laughing. "You win!" Timothy bowed and stopped the car.

“Spoken in the voice of the Recording Angel himself,” he said approvingly. “And now gis a kiss, gal, and let’s be friends. And I don’t care if I *do* hurt you!”

Herrings (Bismarck Herrings, as Timothy insisted upon calling it in deference, he said, to Grete) presented a vastly different appearance from that which it had done when he had first seen it in company with Tom Parsons. It was still an ugly building. Apart from pulling most of it down and re-building it, nothing could alter that fact. All the same, it now presented a dignified appearance in that the courtyard had been cleared of grass, weeds, and small, intrusive bushes and in places the surface had been re-laid.

At the back of the house the roses had been cut back from the doorway which opened on to the terrace, the terrace itself had received new flagstones, the lake had been cleared of weed and was now bordered by freshly-laid turves (although the lake itself was still not in a fit state to be used as an outdoor swimming-pool), the gardens had been weeded and re-planted, and the remains of the stable-buildings, previously an eyesore and probably an insanitary one, had been succeeded by a double garage to which an entrance had been made by the side of the gatehouse, so that Timothy’s larger car could have access as well as Alison’s smaller one.

Timothy unlocked the front door and they went straight up to the state bedroom to look under the pillow for the box of matches. Timothy triumphantly produced it, and the first point undoubtedly went to the German girl. Clearly inscribed where she claimed she had written them were the words: *Please help me.*

“So she’s genuine after all, and her story is true,” he said. Alison took the box from him and studied the writing.

“Suppose Grete were a man,” she said, “would you still take this evidence at its face value?”

"How do you mean?"

"Is there any reason why Grete shouldn't have sneaked in here and written the words after Diana and I discovered that she was living in the house?"

"Why would she do that?"

"To lend verisimilitude, and all the rest of it, of course."

"But she didn't—she still doesn't—suspect that we think she might be a member of the gang."

"All right. It's just my nasty, suspicious mind, but, at the risk of being tedious, I must point out that I've had more experience of girls than you have . . ."

"You underestimate my natural charm. If all the experience I've had of girls . . ."

"Were placed end to end, it would reach from Peckham Rye to Manchester. I know all about that, nevertheless you haven't . . ."

"Been in a position of authority in a boarding-school for young female delinquents? Granted, granted. So what?"

"I think we still ought to keep an open mind about Grete, that's all, and you'd agree if she were a man. That is the point I am attempting to stress."

"Let's take it as read. Right. So now we had better decide what else we want done with the interior of this mausoleum and then we'll push off to Cambridge and have us a bite of dinner. Pity we were both at Oxford, but that can't be helped at this late stage of our development."

"We know what we want done, so don't let's waste any more time here. I suggest you take me on the river and we go along and spy out the lie of the land."

"What land?"

"Don't be obtuse—at least, don't pretend to be, because I know you're not. However, if you want me to spell it out, let's go as far as that island at the mouth of the creek and you can point out the Lorrimer boathouse or jetty or whatever it is. I'll be most interested to see it."

"Oh, well, all right, then. Not a bad idea. We've plenty of time. I've booked a room for the night in Cambridge, and there's no hurry so long as we get there in time for a drink and something to eat."

"I've just thought of something else," said Alison.
"About Grete, actually."

"Telepathy. So have I. You say first."

"Well, that night when you first saw Jabez and the others in the great hall at Herrings . . ."

"You mean it was Grete I heard cry out when I whistled. But that's surely obvious by now?"

"Yes, but you told me that, when the men had gone—and she must have known they'd gone—you invited her to come out and show herself."

"And she didn't. Oh, yes, I believe you're right. Grete isn't the injured innocent she wants us to believe she is. She showed herself to you and Diana simply because Herrings was of no more use to her. Now, look: I'm pretty sure those fellows have also given up using Herrings as a base, but if anything peculiar happens while we're on the water, you'll do exactly as you're told. Right?"

"It depends what it is."

"I'll make the decisions, if you don't mind."

"Why?"

"Because I'm older than you are, and because it's my boat. Good childish reasons, I think you'll agree. Children are the only logical beings in existence, therefore I prefer to use their arguments rather than to invoke metaphysics."

"Also you're bigger and stronger and much more ruthless than I am. Those are childish, logical reasons, too, I suppose. It doesn't follow that they are just and right."

"It's clear you've never been to a boy's school if you believe in justice. There ain't any such animal."

"And what about right and wrong? It must be wrong to believe that might is right."

"Not when might *is* right."

"Who's being metaphysical now?"

"So we don't take the boat out. We merely go straight to Cambridge and *push* it out. Will that suit you?"

"No. I want to see that island and the Lorrimer landing-stage."

"If it *is* the Lorrimer landing-stage. We haven't proved that yet. You know, I'm beginning to look forward to that cocktail party."

"Are you changing the subject? I thought we were talking about boats."

"Yes, we are; but I'm also talking about Lorrimer, and it's not really a change of subject, so don't begin another rebellious argument. Just listen."

"Do you really mean you want to go straight to Cambridge without taking me on the river?"

"I don't mind taking you on the river so long as you'll do as you're told."

"Why should I? Have you a sensible reason?"

"All right, then, yes, I have, and here it is: except for Jabez, those other chaps don't know me, but Colquhoun, who is one of them, does know you. If, as we both suspect, this fellow Lorrimer is the third man, that means he knows Colquhoun and Colquhoun may even be staying at his place. They will have been obliged to find another base in this neighbourhood, and as we shall be going past Lorrimer's jetty, it is just possible we may see them both, and that means they will see us."

"Well, if they are using Lorrimer's house as their base, Colquhoun will be at the cocktail party and so what difference will it make?"

"I must have notice of that question."

"You're hiding something from me."

"Well, yes, perhaps I am, and you're going to be very sweet and understanding and not press me to tell you what it is, aren't you? You did promise, I thought."

Timothy gave no orders on the leisurely cruise downstream. A small launch and a couple of motor-cruisers passed by, and on the return journey from the island Timothy's craft met and gave way to a biggish yacht with some noisy people on board. The helmsman wore a yachting cap and was certainly not Jabez Gee, and there was nobody else to be seen except three women who waved to Alison and Timothy as the yacht, listing prettily as she tacked across their bows, went by in an opaque wave of dark, solid-looking water.

Lorrimere's landing-stage (if it was his) was deserted, and as Timothy's motor-cruiser chugged upstream again towards its moorings, there seemed nothing in all the world but sky, water, and reeds except for a family of swans, some ubiquitous coots and moorhens, and the river sucking glutinously at its banks beneath and around the half-exposed roots of the almond-leaved willows and the osier-beds.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lorrimere Court

“And by the glow-worms light well guided,
Goes to the Feast that’s now provided.”

The Temple

To reach any given point by river is usually to travel much further than to go to it by road. In the case of Lorrimere Court, if Timothy and Alison had been approaching it from Warlock Hall (as, in spite of Alison, it was still marked on the Ordnance Survey maps) the journey by road would have been twice as long as that by boat, even allowing for the windings of river and creek. This was because, from Warlock Hall, it would be necessary to drive almost due north to find a bridge, and then to proceed almost due south along the course of the river and part of the creek, make a considerable *détour* inland to avoid the marshes over which there was no road suitable for a car, and so reach the drive which led up to the Georgian house.

Timothy and Alison were to visit Lorrimere Court by neither route. As the cocktail party was to be on the following Tuesday it did not seem worth-while to make the journey to their Cotswold home and back, so they had decided to stay in Cambridge and go to Lorrimere Court from there by way of Long Melford, Sudbury, and Ipswich.

“I wonder,” said Alison, as they drove through this last town and left the Hadleigh road for the ring road before turning off towards Woodbridge.

“What do you wonder?” asked Timothy. “Whether the police are having any success in tracing poor old Mrs. Plumb’s murderer?”

“Yes. I suppose that means you’ve been thinking about it too.”

“Well, Ipswich does suggest that kind of thinking. There’s been nothing more in the papers, and, of course, there’s no real reason for supposing that it had anything to do with the set-up at Lady Matilda’s Rest.”

“Except that Mrs. Plumb is the second old lady from the almshouses to meet with a violent death.”

“Yes, but such a different kind of violent death—I mean, a violent death brought about by such different means and in such a different place—that there need not be any connection.”

“I prefer to think there is one.”

“Then Mrs. Plumb must have been killed by a different murderer, and that’s a bit much to suppose.”

“Not if we’re dealing with a syndicate. I mean it’s obvious that Mrs. Plumb was killed before she could tell something she knew about the death of Mrs. Dasti.”

“Sounds logical, I know, but it’s going to need proof, and where is the proof coming from?”

“Well, there’s no doubt Mrs. Dasti was up to something shady, and that she was more or less of a cats-paw.”

“Both those assumptions still have to be proved. But skip it for once, there’s a darling, and look out for signposts once we turn off towards Woodbridge. We’ve got to turn off again somewhere well this side of a village called Crowford, and, according to the map, after Crowford the roads aren’t much more than causeways over the marshes. Except by way of the river or, rather, the creek, Lorrimer Court is even more off the map than Herrings.”

“If what we think is true about Mr. Lorrimer, are we putting our heads into the lion’s mouth by going to his place this evening?”

"If I thought that, I wouldn't have brought you with me. I don't anticipate any kind of rough stuff whatever."

"I've always wondered why, in violent films, when two men are diving at one another over tables and bar-counters and rolling about on the floor locked in phony wrestling-holds, some sensible woman doesn't pick up a chair and crown the two of them. I'm sure I should, if I happened to be present."

"Crown the villain *and* the hero at one fell slosh? A bit drastic, surely?"

"Well, they'd be equally in the wrong, in my opinion, and a well-handled chair would put an end to the argument."

"Deary me, deary me! Have I yoked myself to an Amazon all unwittingly? Anyway, knock it off and keep your eyes skinned. I don't want to land up facing the car at a thirty-foot drain on these Gytrash-haunted marshes."

"The Gytrash is in Yorkshire, isn't it? The ghosthound is known as the Shuck Dog in these parts, I believe. Anyway, I'm glad we know what haunted Herrings, and yet it's a disappointment, in a way. I *did* hope we'd got a real ghost."

"It's a very strange thing about you. On a journey which I know like the back of my hand, you don't utter so much as a yip, but now that I really do need a pilot, and one who won't say anything except 'Sharp left at the next crossroads and I think we're nearly up to them,' you babble like Tennyson's brook."

"I'm sorry." She transferred her attention to the map which was open on her knees. "I think I'm feeling keyed up on account of meeting this Lorrimer. If he *does* turn out to be the third man, what are you going to do?"

"Drink his gin, eat his canapés, and behave in all respects like a gentlemanly guest, I hope, unless or until we're interrupted."

"You don't think his house will be *raided*?"

"Oh, I've known stranger things happen."

Lorrimere Court had been built on a rising knoll out of the reach of floods, and the approach to it was by a gently-ascending drive from the banks of a stream crossed by a broad wooden bridge. It was not a large house and was approached, at the end of the drive, between two tall pillars crowned with stone balls. A broad, short path, the width of a minor road, then led between lawns to a double staircase with a curved but plain iron rail. Plainness was, in fact, the keynote of the whole façade, which was broken and made interesting only by the built-out central front containing a broad front door supported by two Ionic columns which upheld the usual cornice and pediment. There were three rows of tall, narrow windows symmetrically placed on either side of the doorway front, one row being at the ground-floor level, the others belonging to the first and second floors of the house.

The door was wide open and there were several cars on the gravel. Timothy parked his own car, opened Alison's door, and handed her out, and they approached the house. The proceedings appeared to be formal, for, having given their names as soon as they reached the doorway, they were announced in ringing tones and moved forward to meet their host.

"It's him all right," said Timothy, as they accepted drinks from a passing tray, "and have you spotted who one of the waiters is?"

"Yes, it's Jabez," said Alison. "It only needs Macbeth to give us a full hand."

At this moment Colquhoun was announced, and the fleshy Caesar, accompanied by an improbable blonde, advanced towards Mr. Lorrimere.

"I have no doubt about Lorrimere," said Timothy. "Nobody could mistake that long thin face or those remarkably fine hands."

"He looks far too decent to be mixed up with Colquhoun and Jabez Gee."

"I know. That's what I told you, if you remember. Of course, one can't go by appearances, but I can't believe he peddles dope or murders old women, whereas I can believe anything of the other two. I wonder whether we'll ever come up with the answer?"

Kilbride Colquhoun joined them.

"Why," he said in his unctuous voice, "if it isn't my Lady Macbeth! How did the little show go?"

"It went," replied Alison. "Fortunately we found a most adequate stand-in for you."

"Did you, indeed? And who may that have been?"

"Young Mr. Davidson."

"Oh, your callow red-headed boy friend?"

"He certainly has red hair, but I don't recognise the rest of the description," said Alison coolly. "I had better introduce you to my husband. Tim, this is Mr. Kilbride Colquhoun, whom I met for a couple of rehearsals at Miss Pomfret-Brown's school, and who walked out on us before the performance."

"That be hanged for a tale, my dear lady! I was forced to throw up the part owing to major commitments elsewhere. I made a full explanation and offered my profound apologies to Miss Pomfret-Brown. Anyway, I'm glad the little show went off all right."

"It was most enjoyable," said Timothy, "and the dressing-room conversation of two gentlemen whose names escape me, but who played the parts of Ross and Banquo respectively, was both interesting and illuminating."

"Yes? Oh, well, if you'll both excuse me, I see some people I really must go and talk to. See you later, I hope."

"He didn't want to know about Bobby Eaves and Francis Downwell," said Alison. "Look, we don't know anybody here except him, so how long need we stay?"

"I'd like a quiet word with our host before we make our final farewells."

"Incidentally, we don't appear to have a hostess, so I suppose that means he's not married."

"He seems to be getting on well with Colquhoun's dizzy blonde. What do you think she is?—a leading lady in a strip-show, or a chorus girl in a musical?"

"I wouldn't have the faintest idea. Ah, he's pushing her off on to that long-haired couple who are rooted to the table where the whisky is."

"Right. That leaves him alone for a minute. I'll take my chance before he gets tangled up with somebody else."

"What are you going to say to him, Tim?"

This remained a mystery, for just as Timothy began making his way, with Alison, through the room, which by this time was becoming congested, a servant came up to Lorrimer and they went out through a curtained archway.

"Don't look now," said Alison, no longer concerned with any answer her husband might have been going to make to her last question, "but I have an idea that the real party is about to begin."

"What makes you say that?"

"I saw the servant say that the police are here."

"You're pulling my leg! You couldn't have done!"

"Yes, really!"

"Since when have you been a lip-reader?"

"Oh, it's one of the tricks of a schoolmistress's trade, like having eyes in the back of one's head. Tim, you scheming brute, *you brought the police here!* That's why you knew it was safe for me to come!"

Jabez Gee, bearing a tray of drinks, came up to them. Alison put an empty glass on the tray; Timothy did the same and took a full one.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Jabez very quietly, "but the boss says would you spare 'im a minute in the ante-room?"

"Oh, all right," said Timothy. He turned to his wife.

"Back in a minute, darling. Lead the way, Gee."

In the ante-room, a small apartment which separated the entrance hall from the salon, Lorrimer was alone and the other door to the *salon* was closed.

"Ah, here you are," he said, as Timothy came in and Jabez slipped away to carry on his duties as waiter. "There's a police superintendent here, name of Dunne. He wants a word with us, my dear chap. It seems there's been some funny business going on around these parts, and he's looking into it. Seems to think you and I may be mixed up in something shady."

"Oh, yes?" said Timothy. "What sort of something shady?"

"Well, do you own a boat, a motor-cruiser?"

"Now, look," said Timothy, who had made up his mind to speak bluntly, "if it's anything to do with harbouring illegal immigrants, I'm putting the onus of explanation on you and Colquhoun and Gee. I know all about your meetings at Warlock Hall and the preparations you made to receive these coloured chaps."

"Illegal immigrants?" said Lorrimer. He laughed. "Good lord, if that was all, I wouldn't turn a hair. My dear fellow, the blighters are looking for dope. They claim to have had a tip-off. They've got search-warrants and God knows what-all, and when they've finished with this place and my servants and—blast their officiousness!—my guests, they're going over to Warlock Hall to turn *you* inside out. Thought I'd just tip you off. Neighbourly feeling and all that sort of thing. Well, perhaps you'd better push along to them through that door there, or they'll begin to think we're in collusion or something."

"Right, but I'd like another word with you later, if we get the chance," said Timothy.

Dunne was accompanied by a detective-inspector and a couple of plain-clothes men.

"Mr. Herring?" he said. "Just so, sir. There are a few questions we'd like to ask you. You will understand that any

information you can give us will be treated in strict confidence . . .”

“Unless it needs to be produced in court as evidence. Oh, yes, I quite understand,” said Timothy. “By the way, I’m staying in Cambridge tonight. I don’t live in this neighbourhood, although I do happen to own a house here.”

“Yes, of course, sir. We have no intention of inconveniencing you and we’re grateful to you for the tip-off. When we’ve finished here—I’m afraid it may take us some time—we should like you to accompany us to Warlock Hall. We shall be very much obliged to you for your continued co-operation, and will undertake to keep you there no longer than is absolutely necessary. You see, if the information you’ve given us is correct, the stuff we’re looking for may still be hidden there. It certainly doesn’t seem to be here.”

“I’ve got my wife with me. I’m not leaving her here alone.”

“That will be quite all right, sir. We’ll certainly take her with us. Have you any objection to being searched? In your case it is merely a matter of form, but we don’t think it advisable to leave anybody out.”

“It will be more convenient for you to drive your own car, sir,” said the detective-superintendent, some two hours later, “but I’ll have to send one of my men with you and a couple more in a police car to follow up. I can’t afford to take any chances. Not that I’ve any reason to suspect you, sir, of course.”

The cocktail party had been allowed to go on, but it had gradually petered out as the flustered and confused guests had been searched, cleared, and freed. Dunne had planned a full-scale raid. The house appeared to be full of uniformed men in addition to the plain-clothes officers.

They searched the mansion, they were unobtrusively posted at doors and french windows, and when Timothy took Alison out into the vestibule for a breath of air which was not heavy with cigar and cigarette smoke, he found a policeman on duty there, too.

At last, however, they were free to go. They took leave, somewhat ironically, of their host, whom they found moodily drinking whisky with Colquhoun and several people who, it appeared, were staying in the house, but he put down his glass when they approached and went with them towards the door.

"I'm awfully sorry about all this," he said. "I don't have the faintest idea why I should be raided. I imagine the police got a tip-off from somebody who doesn't like me much. As it happens, they've drawn a blank. Still, it doesn't do a fellow any good with the friends and neighbours to have his place raided for dope. Puts ideas into their heads, don't you know."

"Quite," said Timothy. "Well, no hard feelings so far as I'm concerned, although I do resent having had my wife subjected to all this—being searched and so forth. Not at all what one expects on an evening out." He hoped he sounded hurt; he merely felt hypocritical and rather foolish, realising that he had brought the police on a wild-goose chase.

"She was an extremely nice woman, the police matron, or whatever she's called," said Alison. "Well, good-bye, Mr. Lorrimer. It's been a most interesting and unusual party, and it was very kind of you to invite us."

"Well," said Timothy, when he had settled her in the car and two plain-clothes men were occupying the back seat, "you've taken it all pretty coolly, I must say."

"How did you think I would take it?"

Timothy could think of half-a-dozen ways, but mentioned none of them, and they drove by the roundabout route to Herrings. Timothy opened the front

door, took the policemen into the great hall, and briefly explained the lay-out of the house, including the way to get up to the attics. He also mentioned that he believed a secret stair led to the state bedroom, but that, so far, he had not found it.

"A secret staircase, sir?"

"Yes. We spent a night here some weeks ago, and there's no doubt that somebody managed to get into our room in spite of the fact that there was a spring lock on the door."

"Somebody must have had a key, sir, don't you think?"

"Could be, I suppose."

"You told the super you suspected your caretaker of harbouring illegal immigrants."

"Well, I know the fellow Gee, my caretaker's son, was involved, but I don't think he was the head of the gang. He hasn't the brains. I think the business was run by Mr. Lorrimer and that chap Colquhoun, the actor fellow who was at the party tonight."

"Well, sir, if you and your wife will make yourselves comfortable for a bit, we'll have a look round. But if there's a secret staircase it may take us all night to find it."

"You'll have a job, anyway. I'm having electric light installed, but I haven't got around to it *yet*."

"Oh, well, in that case, sir, we'll just ask you to come with us to the gatehouse, as that's where the caretaker lived, and we'll have a look round with our torches. Then you'd like to go back to your hotel. Cambridge, I think you said, sir. Will you be staying there more than one more night?"

"I hadn't planned to, but I'm at your disposal, of course." He gave the name of the hotel and confirmed his home address and then he and Alison were escorted to the gatehouse. Timothy produced the key and they all mounted to what had been Mrs. Gee's sanctum before Timothy's workmen had taken down the partition and a pantechicon

had removed Mrs. Gee's belongings to her new home, wherever that was.

"Hm!" said one of the officers, flashing his torch around the bare, stone-walled room. "This the whole premises, sir?"

"Unless you count the roof."

"This stair goes up to the roof, does it? Well, there's nothing more we can do here tonight, or in the house itself, come to that. Well, look, sir, I'm going to leave a man in charge and we'll comb out the whole place tomorrow."

"Any objection if I come along?"

"Certainly not, sir. Just as well you should be here . . ."

"So that I'm on hand if anything awkward turns up, I suppose? I think it's highly doubtful, you know. If there ever was anything here to interest you, I'll bet it's been moved before this. Anyway, expect me some time during the morning. Good night."

"Tim," said Alison, when they were on their way back to Cambridge, "I know you tipped off the police to raid the cocktail party, but what made you think of doing it?"

"Oh, just one of those things. I merely let Dunne know that we should be among those present and that I hadn't the smallest glimmer of why we had been asked, and one thing led to another. Well, it seemed as though he was glad of the information about the party, and that's as much as I know."

"Don't hedge. You *knew* he'd be glad of it. Why?"

"Well, I know that when I heard Lorrimer, Colquhoun, and Gee talking together that first time, Lorrimer was against moving their headquarters from Herrings to his place, which we now know to be Lorrimer Court, but it seemed to me that they had no alternative."

"That's not a logical thought. They may have half-a-dozen possibilities."

"Be that as it may, if Mrs. Dasti was mixed up in anything—and, according to the evidence we have in our

possession, and it includes her death and that of Mrs. Plumb, she most certainly was—she was most likely peddling dope. It certainly wasn't illegal immigrants."

"But, from what you told me, it was the illegal immigrants that Lorrimer refused to have at his place. The dope exists only in your imagination, so far."

"I know, but it exists in the super's imagination, too, and I think, when I mentioned the cocktail party and my suspicions concerning it, that what had already occurred to me occurred to him also."

"And that was?"

"That the social occasion was not only a cocktail party, but that when 'the county,' if you know what I mean, had left, the real business of the evening would commence."

"Yes, but the materials for what you call 'the real business of the evening' weren't there."

"Apparently not. Oh, well, you can't win them all."

"So now the police suspect us of trying to pass the buck, and that the stuff, whatever it is, is hidden at Herrings."

"I don't suppose Dunne believes I'm guilty, even if he finds the stuff there. And we're involved, anyway. There *must* be some connection between Herrings and Lady Matilda's Rest, apart from ourselves. I mean, look at the facts. The minute I go down to what was then Warlock Hall, things begin to happen. I then go to Lady Matilda's Rest and an old woman whom the other inmates suspect of some kind of under-the-counter trafficking in Horsebridge market gets murdered, and when another of the old ladies tries to tell the coroner something he doesn't want to hear because he thinks it's irrelevant, she gets knifed in a cinema in Ipswich. There *must*, I repeat, be a connection."

"Why do you think we were invited to the cocktail party?"

"To be carefully vetted and sounded, I think. Gee will have tipped Lorrimer off, weeks ago, about us . . ."

"But they don't know of our connection with Lady Matilda's Rest, because Gee doesn't know about that, so he couldn't have told them."

"He does, and he could, if his mother had told him that I once mentioned Lady Matilda's Rest to her."

"That only holds good if you can prove that Mrs. Dasti was working for them and—"

"I know, and until Dunne finds out who murdered her and why. I can't prove it, but, all the same, I've no doubt Lorrimer and Colquhoun have looked up me and my activities, and they'll know of my connection with Phisbe. They'll also know that young Coningsby is Phisbe's dog's-body and that Miss Coningsby-Layton is Coningsby's aunt. Well, doesn't it begin to add up?"

"Yes, it does. Do you think the police will find anything at Herrings? And to what extent shall we be involved if they do? I mean, dope found on the premises . . ."

"I think we'll jump that particular fence when we come to it."

"Tim, suppose the police don't find anything at either house? Aren't they going to be rather angry with you for bringing them on a wild-goose chase?—and such a crowd of them, too."

"I know. And now stop worrying. I'm beginning to think rather kindly of bed and a little sleep."

"We shall be pretty late back to the hotel."

"Never mind. I chose one which has a night porter. Oh, and, by the way, I'll go alone to Herrings tomorrow."

"Just as you please, but why?"

"So that you can have breakfast in bed and a thoroughly lazy morning, so thank me nicely and don't begin any arguments."

"I wasn't going to. So long as I know the police are at Herrings, I don't mind what you do, and I'd love to have a thoroughly lazy morning. You'll tell me all about it when you get back, though, won't you?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Various Ladies

Charon: "Shame on thy witching note,
That made me thus hoist saile, and bring my

Boat:

But Ile return; what mischief brought thee
hither?

Phylomel: A deale of Love, and much, much
Griefe together."

Charon and Phylomel, a Dialogue Sung

Timothy left Cambridge at nine on the following morning, and found Dunne waiting for him at Herrings.

"Ah, sir," he said, "you're in good time. I hadn't expected you for another hour yet. I've been having a look around the outside. A nice place you've got here, sir."

"Pleased you think so," said Timothy. "I'd gladly sell it, but you know what the old song says."

"'My wife won't let me,'" supplied Dunne cheerfully. "I don't wonder. It's a fine old pile. Historic, too, I don't doubt. Well, do you mind if we go inside, sir?"

Timothy cocked an eye at him.

"I gave you the keys last night and, anyway, you left a man here. Don't tell me you haven't had a look round already," he said.

"Yes, sir, we have, of course, but there's something I'd like to show you."

"Not my secret stair?"

“Well, yes, sir, as a matter of fact, it is. You’d have found it yourself, in your own good time, sir. It wasn’t difficult to locate. These panelled rooms are all alike in one respect, sir, especially with the linen-fold type. Very easy to disguise the join and merely a matter of trial and error to find it. P.C. Richards had an interesting night, he tells me. He had a bit of a clue because he’s seen the little secret stair at Athelhampton in Dorset, you see.”

“So have I. The point is, coming back to Herrings . . .”

“I beg your pardon, sir? Herrings?”

“Oh, my wife insists upon renaming the Hall. She is allergic to warlocks and their kind.”

“Ah, yes, Herrings, of course. I understand, sir. Same as Batemans, and other such. Named for the original owners. Very common, especially all over Sussex, I believe. You were saying, sir?”

“I wondered whether you had found anything interesting on the no-longer-secret staircase.”

“Not a thing, sir, except that it has been used pretty recently. That was one of the things Richards discovered. I left an insifflator with him so that he could amuse himself this morning before I got here. He found some very nice sets of prints here and there about the house. We shall get them photographed and blown up, of course, but I don’t think they’ll help us.”

“Not if some of them were made by Lorrimer and Colquhoun?”

“Well, we shall have to see, sir. We’ve got the glasses they were using last night, but even if we prove (as I’ve no doubt we shall) that they have been in your house, I don’t think it will lead to anything of sufficient importance to be of any help to us. They might even say you invited them here, and if Gee backed up their assertion, well, we’d be stymied, as they say. It would be one word against another, and that’s not much use as evidence.”

“Well, am I going to be allowed to see this staircase?” They went inside. The narrow spiral stair, beautifully fashioned in oak, was very short. It led directly from the Tudor room which had the oriel window, and it came out in the state bedroom in which Timothy and Alison had slept. “Just a short cut from parlour to bed, I suppose,” Timothy went on, when he had seen it. “I hope you’re not going to suggest taking it up, Superintendent, to find out whether there’s a load of cannabis hidden under the treads?”

“On the lines of the princes in the Tower, sir? Oh, no, this staircase is all of a piece. There’s nothing hidden underneath it, or anywhere else in the house. You mentioned some palliasses, sir, that were laid down in the basement and elsewhere.”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure that illegal immigrants were brought here. I can’t prove it, of course.”

“There was a case in the papers of cannabis being hidden in tins marked ‘meat tenderiser,’ sir, so why shouldn’t it have been secreted in those straw palliasses? Not at all a bad place to park the stuff, come to think of it. It would probably be in the form of a green powder packed into bags and hidden among the straw. Pity they got nervous and remove the palliasses so soon. I’d dearly like to have had a look inside ‘em.”

“So there were not, never have been, any illegal immigrants here? Is that what you mean?”

“Well, they may have imported them along with the dope, sir, but they may not have actually landed them, of course. The coloured chaps might have come in as crew. There are all sorts of dodges, no doubt. All the same, from what you told me you overheard of their conversation, I think the immigrants came ashore all right.”

“And when the time came, all they had to do about the dope was to paddle a small boat up-river to Lady Matilda’s Rest, give the cannabis to Mrs. Dasti and leave the rest to her? I suppose she got mixed up in the business through

her husband and found, after he died, that she couldn't get clear, even if she had wanted to."

"You're not forgetting that we haven't found any cannabis yet, sir?"

"No, I'm not forgetting that, but I know Mrs. Dasti met Mrs. Gee in Horsebridge covered market, and there's no doubt Lady Matilda's Rest was marvellous camouflage for anybody peddling dope. I wonder how Mrs. Dasti managed to get the nomination to the almshouses, though?

According to Miss Coningsby-Layton, the inmates were put through a mincing-machine of recommendations and tests before they were given a place in the almshouses, you know."

"With a Mr. Aily and a landowner like Mr. Lorrimer behind her, I don't see a local council turning awkward on Mrs. Dasti; sir, do you? But, talking of Miss Coningsby-Layton, another little bit of information has turned up. Before I left the station this morning, one of my men picked up a letter which had come by hand. It was anonymous, but it must have come from one of the guests at the cocktail party, I think, if not from Lorrimer himself. It suggested we should try Pollingford Manor, not very far from here. Do you know anything about it?"

"Nothing whatever."

"It's a tumble-down old place right next to yours, sir, allowing for the woods and grounds in between."

"Oh, then I think I've seen it from the river, but surely it's nearer Lorrimer's place than mine?"

"Not by a long chalk, sir. Things are deceptive from the river because it winds so much."

"By the way, Superintendent, I know it's nothing to do with anybody outside the police force, but how is that business at those almshouses progressing?"

"The demolition work has been completed, I believe, sir."

“You know I don’t mean that! I’m talking about the deaths of those two old ladies. I haven’t seen anything more in the papers, although I’ve been keeping a look-out.”

“There’s been nothing to see, sir. We are pursuing our enquiries, but we haven’t got a real lead even yet. In the case of Mrs. Dasti we still have nothing but the information we had at the beginning. What you and I have just been discussing is nothing but surmise, so far as Mrs. Dasti is concerned or the illegal immigrants either, come to that.”

“Surmise that she went into the town to dispose of some stuff of some kind, you mean, and that we suspect the stuff was cannabis?”

“You may *think* she pedalled the stuff, sir, but we haven’t traced her suppliers and we don’t know that we’ve found her contacts. I am certainly not prepared to charge anybody at present, although I could bear to put a name to those two workmen the matron spotted on that roof.”

“And Mrs. Plumb? What about *her* death?”

“We can’t find any tie-up between her and Mrs. Dasti except that they both lived at Lady Matilda’s Rest and that Mrs. Plumb had the name for being a bit of a snooper. It’s more than likely the deaths were not connected with one another. Mrs. Plumb could have been stabbed in a cinema by some young tearaway who was flick-knife happy. There are plenty of them about.”

“I still think it was too much coincidence for that explanation to hold water, you know, especially in view of what she said—and what the coroner wouldn’t let her say—at the inquest. Can’t her relatives tell you anything?”

“Nothing helpful, sir, except that she seemed pretty flush. Told them she’d always saved her pocket-money at the Rest instead of blueing it on sweets and things, like the others, and there’s nothing to indicate she wasn’t telling them the truth. Anyway, they can’t throw any light upon her death.”

"I'd say Mrs. Dasti bribed her to keep her mouth shut about something she knew or had guessed about the transactions with Mrs. Gee in Horsebridge market."

"Then why should she have been murdered, sir?"

"Presumably because she didn't keep it shut, or else somebody was afraid she wasn't going to."

"There's something I ought to ask you before we go any further into all these matters, sir, and I hope you won't take it amiss. Have you any personal grudge against Mr. Lorrimer, sir?"

"I? Not particularly, except that he used this house in conspiracy with that actor fellow Colquhoun. By the way, do you know anything about a man—probably a ship's officer—called Jankers? He was mixed up in the business, whatever it was. His name was mentioned in that conversation I overheard. He and Gee could have been those two men on the roof at Lady Matilda's Rest. Neither of them would have been recognised there."

"Something in what you say, sir. No doubt we shall look into it when the time comes."

"You might begin by asking Gee how he came to be a waiter at that cocktail party. A more ham-fisted, uncouth juggler with trays and glasses I've never seen in my puff. Take my word, he was there for no good purpose."

He reported the conversation to Alison when he rejoined her.

"I suppose Mrs. Plumb's relatives are out of it?" she said. "If she really had money, she may have made a will."

"I imagine that angle has been fully investigated."

"But somebody must have known she was going to the cinema that day, and must have known where she would be sitting, too, unless it simply *was* some bloody-minded young hooligan out for kicks, as the loathsome expression

is. It's even possible that the wrong person got stabbed. Have the police thought of that?"

"I'm sure they have. It's always a possibility, and they are certain to have considered it. My view is that they have reached a dead end and that they think this business of rounding up drugs and illegal immigrants is a dead waste of time."

"Don't keep saying 'dead.' It's depressing."

"Yes, very Freudian, too. Anyway, they're going to look at Pollingford Manor, I think. Wonder whether they'll find anything there?"

"Where is Pollingford Manor?"

"Somewhere between Herrings and Lorrimer Court, but much nearer to Herrings, according to Dunne."

"Who owns it?"

"I've no idea. It's falling down, it seems. I shouldn't think anybody lives there. Anyway, the police have had a tip-off and they've gone to give it the once-over. When they've finished with it, I wouldn't mind taking a look at it myself."

"Oh, Tim, please don't!"

"Why ever not?"

"Whether they find anything or not, it's going to look rather peculiar if you go snooping round it, isn't it? After all, we're mixed up in all this on every possible count, it seems to me. There were the palliasses at Herrings, there's Grete whom we haven't so much as mentioned to anybody except P.-B., there's Lady Matilda's Rest, and there's this tip-off you gave the police about the cocktail party . . ."

"To which the answer was a lemon. Yes, I think I see what you mean. If I begin putting a foot wrong, I could be under suspicion from the police. Yes, it's quite a thought, that. 'Be thou as chaste as ice,' and all the rest of it. *Hau Kay*, as Mr. Kaplan would say."

"You know," said Timothy, as they drove away from Cambridge, "there are five key-sentences which unlock all the store of modern thinking."

Alison who, as usual, had been sitting silently beside him doing her own thinking, said:

"Only five? What are they?"

"I quote, as under: 'You can have any colour you like, so long as it's black.'"

"That wouldn't apply to our masters."

"Our masters?"

"The trades unionists. But go on."

"'I'm all right, Jack.'"

"That would certainly apply to some of their officials."

"'All men are equal, but some are more equal than others.'"

"The Russian national anthem."

"'I want four volunteers—that'll be you, you, you, and you.'"

"There's a nice touch of P.-B. about that one."

"Finally—and this is where I come in: 'You can include me out.'"

"I hope that doesn't apply to our marriage. Seriously, Tim, what are you trying to say? There's something on your mind. This pessimistic streak is new to me. *I'm* the pessimist in this outfit. Remember?"

"Oh, Alison, I *know* Mrs. Plumb was murdered because of something she knew and wasn't allowed to say at the inquest. I only wish somebody could tell me what it was."

"I've been thinking about that, and I think I know the answer."

"Are you serious?"

"Never more so, as they say often in books but seldom in real life."

"Say on. I shall know whether you're right or not."

"Omniscient fellow! Your name is Ozymandius, king of kings!"

“No fooling! Shoot.”

“The clue for which you are seeking is Mrs. Gee. Ever since we realised she must be feeding and sheltering Grete I’ve known she must be far more deeply involved than we’ve ever given her credit for.”

“Well, agreed, so far. So what?”

“Don’t you see? She was the perfect go-between. Which of the gang could go unsuspected to Horsebridge market on pre-arranged Saturdays and meet Mrs. Dasti? Obviously a respectable working-class woman doing her week-end shopping.”

“Yes, I’ve more or less said all this to Dunne, but, of course, everybody shops on Fridays nowadays. Isn’t it a double stamps day in lots of places?”

“Some places give double stamps on Tuesdays, so don’t quibble. Anyway, Saturday was the only day in the week when it was least suspicious for Mrs. Dasti to go to the market, because it was pocket-money-spending day.”

“Yes, but it was also a day when all the other old ladies spent their money, you know. One or two of them would be certain to notice that she spoke to a stranger.”

“That’s how Mrs. Plumb came to spot that Mrs. Dasti always met the same person. At first I imagine she just noticed this as a fact. Later, I think she mentioned it to Mrs. Dasti—Mrs. Dasti, who, remember, may have got herself involved in the drug trafficking through no fault of her own. I think she got frightened when Mrs. Plumb began probing. First of all I believe she panicked and bribed Mrs. Plumb, but I think, too, that she may very well have tipped off the Gees.”

“So you think Jabez killed her? So do I. But when?”

“Two questions seem to need two answers. I think Jabez was the one who murdered her, because he’s brute enough. The exact hour I don’t know. I can’t see Colquhoun killing anybody; he’s too much of a coward.”

"They're the ones who run amok and do desperate and silly things, you know."

"Possibly. Above all, now that I've spoken to him, I can't believe that a man like Lorrimer would hit a defenceless old woman over the head and stab another one to death."

"I think I agree about that. He may have been the one who *arranged* the chimney-pot business, though."

"Do you think so? It was a very clumsy manoeuvre and didn't work out. Again it sounds more like that oaf Gee to me."

"I shouldn't give Lorrimer too many marks for brains, but he and Gee could have been the workmen the matron spotted on the roof."

"Have you forgotten Jankers, our unknown quantity? A man as well-known publicly as Lorrimer wouldn't have been climbing on roofs. He'd have been recognised. I suppose, too, that you've remembered the medical evidence? That answers your second question, doesn't it?"

"Within wide limits. She was killed somewhere before or soon after midnight on the Saturday. But that means . . ."

"Two things: first, that her death was premeditated, because it was on the Saturday afternoon that the chimney-pot was tampered with. But, Tim, that poses another problem. Why didn't they use her own chimney-pot? On a Saturday afternoon she wouldn't have been in her own cottage, so she wouldn't have heard—"

"Hey, wait a minute, though! Why wouldn't she? Look, here's the whole crux of the matter! It couldn't have been her usual day for going into Horsebridge, *and yet she went!* That's what Mrs. Plumb wanted to tell the coroner. She must have seen her there, and thought, in her Paul Pry way, that, because it was unusual, it must signify something. Then, in the light of the murder, she knew it *did* signify something."

"And that's why she herself was killed."

“Look here, though! She didn’t tell the coroner because he wouldn’t listen, but she may have told those relatives she went to live with.”

“I thought she’d moved from there before she was killed. Didn’t they tell you they had more or less turned her out because she was such a nuisance?”

“Yes, that’s true enough. The police went to them because it was the only address they found in Mrs. Plumb’s handbag, but, of course, it wasn’t where she happened to be living at the time. Still, I know where they hang out. I’ve only got to contact them and ask for the address of the other relatives, the family she had gone to live with when she left them. I gather it’s also in Ipswich, as she was killed in an Ipswich cinema.”

“Perhaps they won’t be very pleased to see you again.”

“Don’t worry. Before I left, I salted that particular mine with a pretended bonus. I shall be quite politely received.”

“Well, really!” said Alison.

“It wasn’t meant in the way you think. I promised it, hoping to induce Mrs. Plumb herself to come across with her information, but, of course, the poor woman was probably dead by the time I got to the house, and, having mentioned the cash, I couldn’t in decency withhold it. That’s how it all came about.”

“Oh, I see. Bribery by any other name . . .”

“Come, come! If it’s done a bit of softening up, it’s done its job, hasn’t it? Poor old Plumb! She seems to have been a bit of a daisy. Must have been, because the people I interviewed were quite decent sorts, I would say, and probably prepared to put up with quite a bit of old buck from the aged relative, but apparently Mrs. P. was a shade over the odds. Judging from her remarks in court, I can well imagine it. Let’s turn about and go back to Ipswich and seek whom we may devour.”

As Timothy had foreseen, there was no difficulty in obtaining Mrs. Plumb's last address. The shop was in a back street, but was well-stocked and the man behind the cash desk—for the small place went in for wire baskets and self-service and called itself a supermarket—turned out to be the proprietor. In the flat above the shop they found Mrs. Plumb's other niece.

"Oh, dear!" she said. "Walter ought to have showed you up, but I suppose he couldn't leave the shop. Are you the police again? There's nothing else I can tell you about poor Auntie."

"No, we're not the police," said Timothy.

"I just thought you had a little bit of the look of that gentlemanly inspector in the Z Cars. I hope you're not offended, sir, me saying that?"

"Not if I remind you of Detective-Inspector Goss," said Timothy. "It's a very nice compliment. All the same, I rather hope my wife doesn't look like some of the policewomen on the B.B.C. programmes."

"Oh, no, not at all, sir. Won't you sit down? Perhaps you'd like a cup of tea. No? Well, what can I do for you, then?"

Timothy produced the official card he had already shown to her husband.

"Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest," she read aloud.

"Yes," said Timothy. "My society was called in to advise upon the possibility of saving Lady Matilda's Rest—the cottages, that is."

"Poor Auntie wouldn't have wanted that. She fairly hated that old place, sir. 'Pull it down and welcome,' she said, when she came to us. But perhaps if she'd stayed there she never would have got herself killed in that dreadful way."

"I'm afraid it wouldn't have made any difference, Mrs. . . ."

“Davis, sir. How do you mean? It was in the cinema here as she met her death.”

“Yes, I know. I’m afraid she had made an implacable enemy and was followed here from the almshouses.”

“Oh, dear, oh, dear! To think of that, now! I always did say that spiteful tongue of hers would get her into trouble. Do you mean they know who did it, then?”

“We think so, but we need some help from you.”

“Oh, goodness me! I don’t know anything about it, I do assure you. Maybe my sister, who she lived with for a bit when first she was turned away from Lady Matilda’s, could help you.”

“I have spoken to your relatives and I’m sure none of you know anything whatever about the killing, but I’m hoping that you can tell us a little bit more about your aunt than the others were able to.”

“If it helps to get that wicked man arrested—pity they don’t hang ’em any more!—I’ll answer anything you like to ask me. I don’t say I wanted Auntie here, or my husband neither, because we certainly did not, but blood is thicker than water, so what can you do when the call comes? The others had turned her out, you see, and wouldn’t do no more for her.”

“I know. Now, look, Mrs. Davis, what did Mrs. Plumb tell you about her last few weeks at Lady Matilda’s Rest?”

“Only how glad she was to leave it, sir.”

“Yes, I know. What I meant was whether she particularly mentioned any of the other old ladies.”

“All of them, sir, and no love lost, I’m sorry to say. As to any one in particular, I don’t know as I took all that much notice. You know what old people are. They maunder on, and you find, half the time, you’re not listening. Was there anyone in particular you had in mind?”

“Well, I didn’t really want to prompt you with what the lawyers call a leading question.”

"I know what you mean. Well, now, let me think . . . No, I'll tell you what! Suppose I go down and mind the shop, and ask my husband to come up here. Poor Auntie used to aggravate him so much that he might remember something that I've forgot." She left them, and in a few moments her husband came into the well-furnished little parlour.

"Auntie? A fair caution she was. Not a good word to say about anybody," he said, "poor old soul. I recollect her speaking very rough about somebody at the Rest she called 'a dirty nigger.'"

"You can't remember the woman's name?"

"Wait a minute. Near enough I can. I recollect Auntie saying, 'Dusty by name, and dirty by nature. Fancy her marrying a black man!' Them were Auntie's words. Very prejudiced she was."

"Oh, I think I know which woman she meant. Did she say anything more about her, do you remember?"

"Nothing that comes to my mind. Yap, yap, yap, she went on, all the time. I used to be glad of the shop, to get away from her tongue. Not as she wasn't grateful to us for having her. *We* never got the rough edge. Mind you, I reckon she knew I wouldn't put up with it, for one thing, and my brother-in-law, he'd turned her out, for another. Well, we'd give her a home, and she knew we didn't have to. The council what ran the cottages, and the warden and that, they'd have had to find her somewhere to go, if we hadn't taken her in. I didn't want her, that's a sure thing, but there you are! She was the wife's auntie, when all's said and done, and we'd always promised she could come here if things didn't go right for her with the other family, them having a daughter as would be wanting to get married and needing the room."

"Apart from remarking that Mrs. Dasti was married—had been married—to a coloured man, did she say anything else about her?" asked Timothy.

“Oh, yes. Very spiteful she was about the poor soul. ‘Well, there’s one thing she didn’t have to sell in Horsebridge market, and that’s herself, the old cow,’ she used to say. ‘I could tell the tale about her, not as it’s much good now, ’cos she be dead. But if she wasn’t dead, she’d likely be in gaol by now, the mean old skinflint, if I had let out everything as I’d got to know about her since I follered her to market.’ They was Auntie’s words, as near as I can recollect of ’em.”

“Do you think it’s enough to go on?” asked Alison, when they had returned to the car and were on their way home.

“I think it’s enough to justify our repeating it to Dunne. His investigations in Ipswich will have been quite different from ours. He’ll have turned the cinema upside down, of course, and he’ll have asked Mrs. Davis and the other sister whether their aunt had any enemies, but he won’t have got any helpful answer to that. They probably said that she didn’t get on with the other old ladies, but then nobody imagines that one of *them* could have stabbed her in a cinema in Ipswich, or anywhere else, for that matter. I wonder what Dunne made of that other property? I’d still like to go and take a look at it, you know, in spite of your awful warning.”

“Suppose we try to forget all about the whole thing for tonight? I think I’d like a rest from it.

“Well, of course, so would I.”

But, as it turned out, a rest from it was the last thing they seemed likely to get. There was a message on the telephone pad when they got back to their Cotswold home, asking them to ring Miss Pomfret-Brown as soon as they could.

“Grete, I’ll bet a pound,” said Timothy, as he dialled the school number.

“I wouldn’t even bother to take you up on that,” said Alison. This turned out to be a wise decision, as Miss

Pomfret-Brown's first words proved.

"It's that pestilential German gal you stuck me with," she said.

"What about her, my priceless Sabrina?" asked Timothy. "Has she bitten the hound Bismarck, or has he bitten her?"

"Don't be an impudent jackanapes, young Herring. She's skipped, that's what about her."

"Broken ranks and deserted? Oh, dear me!"

"Never mind you. What do I do about it? Inform the police? Must track her down somehow. Bismarck, you know, is inconsolable. No accountin' for the strength of national feelin', I suppose. Off his food and howls outside the gal's door like a demon lover."

"There is no need to ring the police. I know where to find Grete."

"You do? Well, get on with it, then. I don't want to get into trouble with the police for harbourin' the wretched gal, let alone havin' me dog pinin' away."

"When did she turn up missing?"

"This morning. Didn't appear at breakfast and her bed hadn't been slept in."

"Perhaps she's eloped. Have you counted your gardeners and groundsmen?"

"Get off the line and put Alison on. I want to speak to someone who'll talk sense."

Timothy handed over the receiver, muttering as he did so, "Keep it as short as you can. I think I ought to ring Dunne. If Grete has teamed up again with Lorrimer and Colquhoun, we may have the lot of them in the bag."

"There's something else we have to do, it seems to me," said Alison, when she had put down the receiver.

"What's that?"

"We ought to tell the superintendent to find a way of getting the matron who saw those men on Mrs. Dasti's roof

to have a look at Lorrimer, Colquhoun, and Gee. If she recognises any of them, I think we're home and dry."

"And to think that Mrs. Davis didn't think you looked like a policewoman! The trouble, as you have foreseen, is how we're going to bring all four together. It would be different if the police would organise an identity parade for the matron, but I'm damn sure Dunne won't, especially as Lorrimer is sure to be a J.P., among other things."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Herrings at Leisure

“No boysterous winds, or stormes, come
hither,
To starve, or wither
Thy soft sweet Earth! but (like a spring)
Love keep it ever flourishing.”

Sung by the Virgins

“Well, sir,” said Detective-Superintendent Dunne, “the matron who used to be at Lady Matilda’s Rest has identified Gee as one of the men whom she spotted on the roof that Saturday afternoon, but, of course, he denies it. Still, I think we shall get him in the end. Of course, it was a good time to choose, because most of the old ladies had gone out shopping, but we can round up one or two, I’m quite sure, who were staying at home that day.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if, when you prove it was Gee they saw, he’ll rat on his partner.”

“More than likely, sir. Murder is a much more serious offence than smuggling.”

“Of course, they soon moved those palliasses I saw at my place. I suppose the idea was that when the police investigated and couldn’t find any trace of illegal immigrants, there would be nothing with which the Gees could be charged.”

“Ah, but illegal immigrants had been involved, sir. We were told about them by Mr. Lorrimer. He confessed that,

to make enough money to pay his gambling debts, he had helped to get them over here and hide them away, but that he had no idea about the cannabis. We'll have to check, of course, but I'm inclined to believe him. Incidentally, we've found the dope. There was a big cache of it in the palliasses which had been taken to Pollingford Manor. What's more, we rounded up Mrs. Gee. She was in charge there, just as she was at your place, sir, until you made the Hall a bit too hot to hold her and her son, especially after you bought a boat and went cruising."

"I suppose Lorrimer heard about my uncle's death and that Herrings was standing idle."

"That's the size of it, sir."

"Why did they use Mrs. Dasti? Was it really because her husband had introduced her to the drug-smuggling business?"

"Well, we shall never be sure about that, sir, shall we? I can tell you one thing about criminals, though. They don't like to trust anybody all the way, and with good reason, of course. 'Honour among thieves' is a contradiction in terms, because naturally they're all out for what they can get, every man Jack of them. That's why the police have a long, long trail of informers. Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. We wouldn't get a tenth of our convictions if somebody didn't rat. I fancy Gee will come across all right."

"Yes, hoping to get off lighter for his part in Mrs. Dasti's murder. But I wonder who the other chap was? A man named Jankers had been mentioned, you know. I'm sure I caught the name correctly."

"Well, we've found no trace of him yet, sir, but we shall."

"But why did they have to murder Mrs. Dasti?"

"Must have thought she'd become unreliable, sir. That's another of the trials and troubles criminals have to put up with. They feel they've got to guard against every

contingency, so they imagine dangers which simply don't exist. They needn't really have used Mrs. Dasti at all, because either Gee or Colquhoun could have gone to the market and excited no comment when they picked up their contacts there, and that wouldn't have involved Mrs. Gee, either. Lorrimer, being a local public figure, couldn't have appeared in the market without being noticed, but, as I say, I think he's in the clear there."

"So you found the stuff at Pollingford Manor?"

"That we did, sir, and Mrs. Gee, too, as I said. She never went to London at all."

"I'm not surprised. We parted from her at Horsebridge market. She said she wanted to take some shopping with her to her relatives, but we spotted her meeting with a woman I recognised as one of the old women from Lady Matilda's Rest. Of course, by that time, Mrs. Gee had an idea that we had some connection with the almshouses. I suppose the woman she met was Mrs. Dasti. She couldn't have been anybody else. My wife and I worked that out, you know."

"Without a doubt, sir, and I've no doubt that Mrs. Dasti spotted you the day you dropped Mrs. Gee at the market and recognised you as the lady and gentleman who had been to the charity homes, you yourself more than once, maybe, which proved you weren't just a chance visitor. We think she told Mrs. Gee this, and by so doing sealed her own death warrant."

"And you think the murderer was Gee."

"Egged on by his mother, who got wind up, and assisted by this Dutchman, Jankers, yes, sir."

"Well, possibly Gee and this chap Jankers killed Mrs. Dasti, but you're as far away as ever from finding out who killed the other old woman, Mrs. Plumb."

"We can't prove anything there, sir. I doubt if we ever will, although, of course, we never close the files. But the time and place were well chosen, and the means, too."

Knives don't talk, and the seat where Mrs. Plumb sat was in the back row downstairs. We have the usherette's evidence for that. The murder happened, too, (so far as our theories go) while the girl was showing people to seats near the front of the auditorium, or else when she slipped out five minutes before the interval to get her tray of ice-cream and stuff. Of course, there's no doubt somebody followed Mrs. Plumb to the cinema and knew exactly where she was sitting, but Gee claims he was working on the South Coast at the time, and can bring witnesses."

"And her relatives are completely in the clear?"

"Oh, completely, sir, yes. One couple were in their shop, and the other family are sworn to by half-a-dozen witnesses."

"I'm glad of that. They seemed a decent lot. You know, Superintendent, it's a pity you don't seem able to pin that particular murder on the third member of the gang, our friend Macbeth."

"Macbeth, sir?"

"Oh, sorry! I mean Kilbride Colquhoun. I fancy he'd squeal on the others fast enough if you put him on a serious charge."

"Such as?"

"Stabbing Mrs. Plumb, of course."

"Good heavens, we couldn't do that, sir! We don't believe in framing people in this country. You ought to know better than to suggest such a thing!"

"Sorry! It was just a passing thought."

"I suppose, sir, *he* couldn't be this mysterious Jankers?"

"I'd thought of that myself, but I'm afraid it's no go. The first conversation I overheard at Warlock Hall settles it, I'm afraid. They said distinctly that they would have to let Jankers know, and Colquhoun was one of the party when it was said, so I'm afraid that cock won't fight."

"A pity, sir. It would have rounded off part of our case very nicely."

"I suppose," said Alison, when Timothy reported the conversation, "they couldn't get a line on Colquhoun's movements and so forth, from those shady friends of his at Peterminster?"

"What shady friends?"

"Don't you remember that P.-B. mentioned them? She told us that she was able to get him to do Macbeth because he was staying with shady friends in the neighbourhood of the school."

"Why did she think they were shady?"

"Because they were friends of his, that's why."

"I'll ring her up and ask for their address. It's an awfully long shot, because they won't want to get involved, but I think it's worth a try. You mean they might possibly know whether he was in Ipswich when Mrs. Plumb was murdered?"

"Well, perhaps it's because of the play, but I somehow feel that a stab in the dark is something in his line."

"Yes, that's another point, though."

"What is?"

"The stab-wound *must* have been given in the dark. How did he know the exact place to strike? She seems to have died immediately and without a sound."

"You learn quite a lot when you're being coached for duelling on the stage, and he may not have killed her in the dark. There's a time, at the beginning of the interval, when people are scrumming for ice-cream and soft drinks and everybody's attention is distracted and the sales girls are too busy serving down at the front of the auditorium to take any notice of anything else. It's possible she stood up to go to the front, and he did it then. It's much more likely to have been done when she was on her feet than when she was sitting down."

"But the body wasn't discovered until the lights went up at the end of the afternoon performance and people got up to go home for their tea."

"Let's leave the technicalities to the police. You ring P.-B., if you think it's any good."

"I don't think it is, but I have a particular dislike for Colquhoun, and I don't see why he shouldn't stand trial with the other two, especially as I know he'll crack if ever they stick him in the dock. He's just about as yellow as they come. There's another thing against the theory that she was stabbed during the interval, when the lights were up, though."

"And that is?"

"It was an afternoon performance. The cinema would have been almost empty. There wouldn't have been much sale of ice-cream and things."

"At a mid-week showing and the place full of old age pensioners at half-price, and the shop assistants having their half-day off, darling?"

"You have an answer for everything." He rang Miss Pomfret-Brown, but before he could put his question she had news for him.

"We've found Grete," she said. "At least, my hound did."

"Bismarck?"

"Bismarck in person. I'm sorry to say—although I never took to the gal—she's badly injured. It'll be touch and go."

"What happened to her?"

"Stabbed in the ribs. Meant for the heart, I daresay, but missed by that fraction of an inch which makes all the difference."

"Can she talk?"

"Naturally not, at present. Detectives at her bedside night and day. Most inconvenient. She's in the sick-room here, and it means I've got to find somewhere else to put any of my malingering hussies who've decided to take a rest-cure."

"What's happened?" asked Alison, sotto voce.

"Grete's been stabbed." He handed over the telephone. "You have a go. Ask her where it took place. You know the school buildings much better than I do."

Alison cut short a bout of "Hallo, hallo"-ing on the part of the impatient and irascible head of the school by asking, "Where was she found?"

"Oh, it's you," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "In that cubby-hole off the gym. where we used to keep the tennis nets until that blasted Macbeth had it all cleared out because, forsooth, he had to have a dressing-room all to himself."

"Then was the cubby-hole empty when Grete went into it?"

"Well, you don't think damned Macbeth was in there puttin' on his sporran or something, do yer?"

"You're out of period, darling P.-B. It would be his byrnie or his cows' horned helmet, you know. You mean the tennis nets had not been put back, I think."

"You and that young Herring comin' over? Could do with a bit of low company."

"We've got Macbeth, I think," said Alison, putting down the receiver. "He's the only one of the gang who would have known about that cupboard. I wonder how he found out that Grete was at the school? Anyway, I suppose he realised that P.-B. would soon turn her inside-out about what had been going on at Herrings before we took possession."

"I wonder what *her* part in the doings really was?"

"Organising the shipments, perhaps. It must have been fairly important if it was worth the risk of killing her."

"Then she couldn't possibly have been in those attics all the time. You don't think she was really a prisoner there, and that the call for help she wrote on the matchbox was genuine?"

"That could well be. 'But wonder on, 'til Truth make all things plain.' Let's pack a bag and go down and comfort P.-B."

"So Grete may turn out to be innocent, after all," said Timothy, "and Bismarck's love of her to be pure from the taint of nationalism." He stroked the silken-coated dachshund which had just leapt with a lolloping thud on to his knees and was squirming himself into a comfortable position there. "They say dogs always know."

"Bismarck don't," said his owner. "No discretion or powers of selection whatever. Terrorises the tradespeople, on whom we depend for our sustenance and well-bein', and makes friends with tramps and people who come beggin' for subscriptions and tryin' to sell me raffle tickets. Yes, you!" she added sternly to the dachshund who, ignoring her summing up, made himself into the shape of a blackpudding on Timothy's lap and fell asleep.

"Tell me more," said Timothy to Miss Pomfret-Brown.

"The skipper of a Dutch boat brought her over from West Germany. All she wanted was to get to England. She was frightened because she hadn't a permit or a passport. She'd only been at Herrings a week before Mr. Parsons and you turned up that first time. I don't believe a word of it, any of it," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "They can't pull the wool over *my* eyes!"

"She swore that nobody except Mrs. Gee knew she was there. Anyway, Jabez couldn't have known, or he wouldn't have bolted like that when I whistled and Grete yelled out," said Timothy.

"I think they must *all* have known she was there," said Alison. "You believed at the time that Gee thought you were the police, and that's why he ran. Anyway, I suppose Grete will be deported as soon as she's fit again, unless she can persuade our people to grant her political asylum. Are you going to back her up, P.-B.?"

"Not I," said the headmistress stoutly. "I'm absolutely sure she's a wrong 'un. I agree that blasted Macbeth tried to settle her hash, but she had more to sell to the police than you think, young Herring. At least, that's *my* opinion.

Why don't you get 'em to put her in workmen's overalls and confront her with that matron who recognised t'other feller? I think you might get a surprise. Remember that long hair don't mean anything nowadays. Ain't a sex-symbol the way it used to be, distinguishin' the hussies from the oafs."

"Good lord!" said Timothy. He stared in sudden comprehension at Alison.

"Enter the missing Jankers, I think," she said.

"Then why did they say they'd have to tell Jankers about their plans that night?" asked Timothy.

"What somebody said a minute ago. She couldn't have been in yer house that night," said Miss Pomfret-Brown.

"But I heard her cry out. I know I did."

"'The screech-owl screechin' loud, puts the wretch that lies in woe in remembrance of a shroud,'" said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "That's what it was, mark me words."

"Perhaps it was the ghost, after all," said Alison. "Or, more probably, she didn't altogether trust them and had slipped back secretly to overhear their plans."

"Well, it will be a nice little job for Dunne, said Timothy. "He can have a lot of fun proving that she was in Ipswich on the day Mrs. Plumb was murdered. One thing: if Grete is Jankers, Gee (or, more probably, Mrs. Gee) will have told her all about the danger they had to fear from Mrs. Plumb's spiteful old tongue, and that means we have found Mrs. Plumb's murderer. It's quite likely, on the face of it, wouldn't you say?"

"Well," said Timothy, many weeks later, "you've had the Christmas you wanted."

"Yes, indeed," said Alison, looking at the huge log fire which burned in the Tudor grate. "I said, right at the beginning, that I wanted to spend Christmas at Herrings, and it was more than sweet and lovely of you to agree. You didn't really mind it, did you, though?"

"No, I suppose not. Anyway, I'm glad all those people have gone away and I've got you to myself again."

“And you’re glad of that, after being saddled with me for two years and three months? I can’t help feeling that our marriage is lasting unfashionably long. What did you think of Pollingford Manor?”

“Apparently it’s been falling to bits for the last two centuries. Nobody has lived there for donkey’s years.”

“I know. I’ve been given official permission to have it pulled down.”

“You’ve *what?*”

“Well, its land marches with ours, and it’s an eye-sore since we had the woods tidied up on that side of the estate, so I bought it—oh, with my own money, of course—and it’s going the way of all flesh in the spring.”

“The devil and all! What on earth will you get up to next?”

“I was wondering whether we ought to begin our seven sons, darling, but I think perhaps we’ll limit them to two. *Your* favourite son shall inherit the Cotswold hills and *mine* shall have the river, the marshes, and the sky.”

“You’re still in love with this countryside, Alison, aren’t you? Look, I’ll sell up the Cotswold place, if you like, and then we can live here always. I really wouldn’t mind, if you think you’d be happier that way.”

“Oh, Tim! And give up our heated swimming pool! All the same, now we’ve cleaned out this lake, it will be marvellous to bathe here in the summer.”

“Good lord! To hear you talk, I should think our unfortunate children will all be born with webbed feet.”

“Would that disqualify them from the Olympic Games, do you suppose?”

“Stop fooling. Let’s be serious for once.”

“Darling, I *am* being serious. There’s something I have to say.”

“Oh, well, carry on, if you must.”

“Do you remember all those sayings?—you know, ‘I’m all right, Jack,’ and ‘You can have any colour you like,’ and

so on?"

"Of course."

"All right. It's only this: please, *never* include me out."

"I've no idea what you mean. Expound, my angel."

Alison stood up, went across to him, and sat on his knee.

"Well, it's only this," she said. "I want to be an equal partner. You're too fond of all this 'women and children first' stuff. I don't want to be included out whenever anything is difficult or dirty or dangerous. That's all. Is it agreed?"

"Have it your own way. I can refuse you nothing. And I don't care if our children *do* have webbed feet. What can I expect when I've married a naiad?"

"Perhaps you can expect to hear the songs the sirens sang."

"I don't want a siren-song. Sooner or later, I'd like to settle for a son."

"I will attend to the matter personally, and I don't think he'll have webbed feet."

"He can have a fish's tail, for all I care, so long as he comes to me from you."

About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her

father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.